Waves

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Waves

by IncompleteSentanc (Erava)

Summary

Sakura dies on October 10th with green eyes that slowly lose their shine and bright pink hair that turns dark with blood. Then Sakura is born on January 12th with dark blue eyes that get lighter and lighter and red hair so dark it looks black more often than not.

She doesn't know it immediately, but she's a child reborn and time is reborn with her. It's time for a change, and Sakura will do all she can to bring it - for one reason or another. She's a woman reborn, and she's already died once before. What more does she have to fear?

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

> Hello, everyone. It's been a while since I last posted, and this story is, I like to think, fairly unique. I guess we'll see soon enough where this takes us, but I hope you all like it!

Sakura is born on March 28th with blue eyes that slowly turn green and dark pink hair that gets lighter as the days go by. She's born to two chūnin, relatively mediocre and perfectly normal, and grows up to be one herself. She becomes a genin at the age of twelve, a chūnin at the age of fourteen, and goes to war at the age of seventeen.

Sakura dies on October 10th with green eyes that slowly lose their shine and bright pink hair that turns dark with blood. She dies with blood pooling around her and her best friend's blood drying on her hands. She dies knowing that she'd saved Naruto's life, that she'd done everything she possibly could - and she dies knowing that she'd done her part.

She doesn't die easy - but she doesn't die painfully, either. It's after the end, when the war's over and the battle's been won. She dies having given it everything she had, and then she dies giving what she doesn't. Sasuke's brutal genjutsu almost does her in - but she gets back up. She staggers her way to Naruto and Sasuke, finds them lying in their own blood, and does the only thing she can.

She fixes them.

They wake up briefly, tired and worn, and pass back out before she can finish - and she never does finish, anyways. The blood stops, the wounds close over in bright red, thin, and delicate skin, and then Sakura passes out too.

She lays between them, her head propped on Naruto's bloody shoulder, and she knows she's done everything she can.

She knows she's done her part. She's earned her keep.

She's confident at last that she's a true member of Team Seven now, and she feels content with that when her eyes close.

Her forehead's blank, her chakra reserves are beyond emptied, and she

never opens her eyes again.

Not when Kakashi arrives and picks her up, staring in blank horror at her too still form. Not when he takes her to Shizune and Tsunade, and not when Naruto wakes up three days later and pleads for it all to be a lie.

Then Sakura is born on January 12th with dark blue eyes that get lighter and lighter and red hair so dark it looks black more often than not. She's born to a civilian and a shinobi, a housewife and a genius, and grows up to be a genius herself. She becomes a genin at the age of five, a chūnin at the age of eight, a jōnin at the age of eleven, and goes to war at the age of twelve.

This time, Sakura vows, she won't be a simple chūnin, overshadowed by her teammates.

This time, she vows, she's going to change the world - even if she has to do it alone.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> "You hear them when you try to fall asleep,
> They crash to the shore,
> They come from the deep.
> As sure as the sun will rise, the sun will set,
> You taste the salt the closer you get..." - Blondefire, Waves

She's born with red hair so dark it looks black without light touching it. She's born with dark blue eyes that become lighter and lighter until they're the color of glaciers. She's born long and skinny to a civilian woman and a shinobi man who snickers as he looks down at her. "We ought to name her Tsuru." He suggests, and grins shamelessly when his wife pulls one arm from the newborn to smack him on the bicep.

"Oh, be quiet. That's hardly something to joke about - imagine the harassment the poor thing would get." Her mother huffs, looking back down at the newborn. The father does as well, eyes softening before he sits on the edge of the bed for a closer look.

"She has my hair." He notes and his wife hums absently.

They sit in silence, watching the tiny thing sleep away obliviously. "I think I like the name Sakura." The mother says quietly.

The father blinks dark blue eyes, brow furrowing slightly as he looks down at the infant with new eyes. "...That's not a very pleasant name, you know. It's beautiful," He adds quickly but quietly, "but sakura blossoms... they're fleeting. Beautiful but short lived."

The woman bites her lip, staring for a moment longer before he gaze flicks up to meet his. "You think she'll live a dangerous life? Become a shinobi like you?"

His lips quirk in amusement and a small hint of wryness. "Can you imagine a child from us not being one? She'll be the smartest, most beautiful, and most impossibly stubborn kunoichi of our time." He huffs, grinning, and even the worried woman can't help but smile a bit.

"The stubbornness comes from you."

"I'd disagree, but you'd stubbornly insist." He shifts slightly, prodding her hip with his knee, and she rolls her eyes. "I'll teach her everything I know." He says decisively. "Everything. Unless she doesn't want to learn it, or wants to learn something I can't teach - and then I'll find the best teacher in all the country for her." The man vows firmly. "You could give her the most ominous name imaginable and it wouldn't matter because she'll be the best kunoichi of our time. The absolute best."

The woman stares at him intently, searching his determined expression before she smiles tiredly again.

"Sakura it is, then." She says softly.

Heisui knew what she was getting into when she married her husband. It wouldn't be, she'd known at the time, an easy life to be a civilian married to a shinobi. To live every day never knowing if she'd see him the next. If he'd ever come home again.

She'd known when she married him, and she's always been prepared for the lifestyle.

But when her daughter turns three and Heisui walks in to find her playing with a kunai, carelessly left there by the girl's father, she almost chokes on the emotion that rushes through her.

Her husband, she'd known. But from that moment on it's obvious which parent her daughter is going to take after, and the fear that grips Heisui's heart takes her breath away.

"Sakura," She forces out roughly, and her own voice breaks her from her frozen horror. She rushes forward and snatches the kunai from her overly curious daughter, but not before the girl has cut her finger open on it. "Oh, Sakura, no- you can't *play* with that, girl!" Heisui gasps, tucking the kunai into the folds of her kimono and scooping the child up.

She doesn't even cry. The girl just looks down at her finger with a tight frown, brows pulled together, like it's some puzzle she doesn't understand. "It hurts." The girl announces and Heisui's heart twists at the conflicted tone in her voice. Like she doesn't know how to *feel*

about this fact. Heisui quickly sets her daughter on the edge of the bathroom counter, scrounging through the medicine cabinet for some treatment and bandages.

Her daughter never once winces, just watches the motions with a small frown and a curious expression that unsettles Heisui.

Her husband was a renowned genius, and she's starting to realize that the girl takes after him in more way than one.

It's not long after that that Sakura's father picks her up and walks her around the village. The people greet him with smiles and cheerful hellos, and Sakura get especially spoiled by their fondness. Almost every few feet he has to pause to say hello to someone, to let them get a good look at his beautiful daughter, and he takes those moments to watch her himself.

His wife had told him about the kunai. Had cried into his robes and cursed him for his pronouncement at their daughter's birth. She'd blamed him for the girl's interests, for her inevitable future as a kunoichi. But it hadn't taken long for Heisui to pull herself together again, her familiar stubbornness rising in the face of his promises.

"She'll be trained by the best, Heisui. Myself, and all my greatest shinobi. Our daughter will become the best kunoichi - and by the time she's done with her training, she'll be so great that she'll never bleed again," he'd sworn fiercely.

"Yes," his wife had decided firmly, eyes burning with the fire that had captured his love for her. "She's our daughter, after all."

And now, watching Sakura take in her home and all it's people, he only feels more reassured.

Her ice blue eyes are bright and searching, and he can see the way she takes in *everything* and almost seems to memorize it. From the people's faces and words to the cracks in the cobble under his feet, Sakura *watches* it all. Her genius is clear even just from the way she observes the world, and he wonders if maybe she might surpass even him one day.

They've been out for nearly two hours when a young boy, a student, he thinks, approaches them. "Akataki-sama?" The boy asks shyly, cradling a small scroll to his chest, and the man immediately crouches down. The boy must be only six or seven, just starting his apprenticeship, and it takes Akataki a moment to place him.

"Yes, Hikaru?" He questions, settling Sakura on one knee and holding her with an arm around her tiny shoulders. The boy glances at her before offering them both a tentative smile. He holds out the scroll and Akataki takes it, shifting his grip on Sakura so he can hold her and open the scroll at the same time. It unravels and Akataki's eyebrow rise at the work painstakingly painted inside.

He spends the next hour alternating between praising Hikaru for his work and explaining every last detail of the seal to Sakura, who listens with an attentiveness that goes beyond her age.

Yes, Akataki thinks as he smiles warmly at the two children.

This girl will be great.

Sakura's two when she starts to have the dreams.

She doesn't really register it at first - she's only *two,* and she's smarter than she has any right to be but she's still *two.* She's more preoccupied with exploring every single thing she can get to than any sort of weirdness that might happen in her dreams.

But when she's three they start to sink in. The tree-surrounded village, parents who aren't like hers, bullying and misery and a blonde-haired girl who makes it better. She starts to *remember* those dreams. They *stick.*

By the time she's four, she knows a lot. She knows enough that now when something's out of her reach, she manages to get to it anyways. It's her father who catches her doing it - walking up the wall so that she can get to one of the books on the second-highest shelf.

Sakura immediately stops, dropping to the floor and catching herself clumsily - and if she'd failed to, her father's right there in a split second, his hands already grasping her shoulders as her feet touch the

ground. “Where,” her father asks with wide eyes and a tight jaw, “did you learn that.”

I dreamt it, she wants to say, but she’s four and already knows that’s *stupid.* No one would believe it, *and* it sounds really dumb, so Sakura bites her tongue and blinks at him until she can think up a half-truth to offer. “I saw people doing it.” She explains, and that’s *basically* true.

She saw someone named Kakashi walking up a tree and expecting them to learn from observing - and she *had.*

So she really *isn’t* lying or even misleading when she implies that she learned from seeing it.

Her father blinks at her very slowly, expression weird, before he exhales heavily.

“Right. Of course you did. You… saw people doing it. And learned from that?” He says half to himself but she nods anyways. His jaw unclenches and after a moment he offers her a genuine smile. “Gods, but you are a *genius* aren’t you?” He murmurs, pulling her into a tight hug.

She’s not entirely sure why he’s hugging her, but she hugs back anyways.

She dreams about having and loving other parents, but she still loves hers, so she wraps her little arms around him and fists the back of his shirt. Sakura hesitates for a moment, uncertain about his earlier reaction, before she whispers, “I wanna learn more.”

Her father pauses, then pulls away from the hug. His hands are heavy but gentle on her shoulders as he stares at her intently, eyes searching hers. “What would you like to learn, Sakura?”

It only takes her an instant to answer with a fierceness she gets from her (second) parents. *“Everything.”* Sakura whispers.

Her father smiles.

Sakura goes to work with her father sometimes and sits in his big office, reading books he offers her to keep her entertained.

Hokage, the office makes her think, but that isn't right. She doesn't live in the leaves anymore - she lives in the sand and around the water, and the Hokage doesn't matter here. Even if he's important in her dreams.

This time, though, when her father takes her to his office, it's different. There aren't any books on the table next to the sofas, but there is a shinobi standing in front of his desk. "Sakura," Her father starts with a somewhat stern tone that has the shinobi turning with a frown. It's a kunoichi, Sakura corrects mentally, blinking at the woman. She has black hair and brown eyes, so she isn't an Uzumaki - but there's something to her posture that draws Sakura's attention.

She moves with a level of grace that Sakura's never seen before, not even in her dreams.

"This is Unabara. She's here to ask you a few things." Her father explains.

The woman stares down at her for a long minute, arms folded across the ocean-blue vest she wears, and Sakura stares back up at her curiously. Then Unabara gestures to the sofa and table, and Sakura silently follows her over.

The woman *does* ask her things, but not just a few of them. She practically interrogates her, asking about *everything.* Her chakra, her personality, her *weaponry preferences,* which is what finally clues Sakura into what's going on.

Her deduction is confirmed when Unabara frowns at her and asks, "How much do you know about the process to becoming a shinobi here in Uzushio?"

Uzushio is small.

She doesn't have many shinobi, she doesn't have many villagers, at least not compared to other countries - but she's always, always been able to stand on her own two feet.

Uzushio is small, but Uzushio is *strong,* and two weeks later Sakura is starting to understand why.

Uzushio is small. They don't have enough shinobi for the full four person teams she dreams about, and they don't have an academy to teach students anything beyond world history. No, they don't have the people for that. Instead, they have partnerships. Almost every team in Uzushio is made of two people, and the others made of three. The training methods are the same way.

Unabara is her sensei, and Sakura is her only student. A genin at the age of four.

It allows for much more specialized training, Sakura realizes as she ducks under a vicious kick Unabara sends at her head. One on one, Sakura has learned more in the last two weeks than she dreams of learning in two months.

Uzushio is small, and her army is made of packs of two, but that makes it impossible for someone to get left behind. Sakura dreams about another place where the armies are packs of four, where one student had been trained the most and the other two had been left lagging behind.

"It's the Hidden Dragon style," Unabara explains to her when they take a short break from the taijutsu practice. The jōnin is a taijutsu expert - apparently the best in the village. She moves like water, Sakura learns with both a sense of amazement and a sense of fear - because she learns it while trying to avoid death at the woman's hands. Unabara moves like water, but she clashes with all the unforgiving nature of the ocean she's named for. "You're young, but I can already tell you're going to be the right fit for this style. Long, sweeping movements, but brutal blows."

"Hidden, because you look weak. You dodge, you duck, you swoop, you twist. You avoid blows like a coward, and then you strike with the ferocity of a dragon." Unabara lectures her sternly. "You're young. Too young, most would say, but I can see the look in your eyes and the speed you're learning. You'll have this down in two years at the most - and after that, I'll teach you the Tiger's Fury style for when you have to fight large groups."

Sakura nods, thinking of another world where she'd learned to destroy with the touch of a single finger, and figures she'll probably learn that style even faster than this one.

She's five when her father sits her down and sets a pile of books and blank papers in front of her.

He sits beside her, one arm wrapping around her tiny shoulders, and begins to teach her every aspect of every single seal detailed in the books - and then he watches with unnerving intensity as she struggles to use this knowledge to make her own.

She's six and it's been a year and a half when Unabara declares her 'good enough'. She sic's her on two genin, and it takes her twenty seconds to have them both on the ground.

She sic's her on two chūnin after that, and it takes her a minute.

Then Unabara sic's her own four chūnin, and Sakura gets three down before she loses. "Good enough." Unabara informs her as Sakura watches them pick themselves up off the ground.

Any other chūnin would be annoyed at being beaten by a six year old - but they grin good naturedly at her, brushing themselves off.

She wouldn't have won if they'd been fighting her earnestly. They were strictly taijutsu, and Sakura knows for a fact that that's the only reason she took *any* of them down.

"The Hidden Dragon style is only meant for single combat. One on one. One on two, it's still damn effective, but much more difficult. Against three, you start to lose. It's not built for large scale combat - but if you're one on one, you'll win almost every time - no matter who you're fighting." Unabara tells her firmly. "Now, the Tiger's Fury style is different." Unabara pushes away from the rock she'd been perched on, gesturing to all of Sakura's opponents.

They surround her and Sakura steps back, eyes narrowed to watch.

"All of you at once. Don't hold back anything." Unabara instructs.

The two genin and six chūnin strike as one, with impressive coordination considering the team style Uzushio uses.

It takes Unabara thirty seconds to have them all on the ground gasping, weapons and the remnants of jutsu surrounding her. There's a small knick in the shoulder of her shinobi vest. It's the only sign that anything at all had touched her during the ridiculously brief fight.

The jōnin takes her time to help each of them to their feet, looking them over for any serious injury, and Sakura watches intently.

The style reminds her of her dreams. Of the blonde haired woman she'd called 'shishou' who had fought with sheer, relentless strength instead of the absurd grace that Unabara favors. It makes her feel strangely wistful - tugging at her heart - to compare the new style to that woman's.

They're similar, to an extent, and when Unabara finally turns to her and says, "This one will take you three years," Sakura considers for a moment before shaking her head.

"One year." Sakura says decisively.

Unabara opens her mouth, looking briefly annoyed, before she pauses. She searches Sakura's expression, distracted now as the girl thinks back on all the dreams she'd had of her training with that blonde madwoman. "...One year, then. I'll hold you to it." Unabara warns.

Sakura blinks from her thoughts and then flashes the woman a toothy grin. "One year." She repeats.

And as the battered shinobi make their way out of the training yard, Sakura can't help but recall the other things that blonde woman had taught her.

She dreams.

It's something Sakura's starting to find stranger and stranger as the years go on, but also more and more comfortable. She's always dreamt, as long as she can remember, but she hadn't understood them then. She hadn't *paid attention,* not like she should have, and now Sakura does.

She dreams every night of the sprawling village, easily twenty times

the size of little Uzushiogakure, where their vests were green and their symbols were of swirling leaves. They carry Uzushio's symbol on the back of their vests, and that unnerves her for reasons she can't quite remember.

She dreams of her parents - old parents, not *her* parents - who had loved her but never quite understood her the way hers do. She dreams of a black haired boy with red eyes and a blonde haired boy with eyes as bright a blue as her mother's. She dreams of being ridiculous to them, sweet to one and cruel to the other.

She dreams of mourning one and learning to cherish the remaining, with hair like sunshine and eyes like the ocean on bright, clear days.

She's seven when she dreams of him dying. Of her hand wrapped around his heart, squeezing it just to keep his body intact long enough to revive him.

And then she wakes up, sits up in bed, and frowns down at her hands. She thinks about her dreams, about the lessons she'd dreamt of in the past, and tries to draw the chakra to her palms - but it won't quite work.

Her chakra had been meager in her dreams, she remembers.

Her chakra's far from meager now.

She's seven, she's almost mastered the Tiger's Fury style, and she corners her father in his office one day. "Can I help you?" He asks her uncertainly, blinking at the determined expression she wears.

Sometimes she wonders if she looks ridiculous like this, being all of seven years old with dreams of being *seventeen.* "Dad," She starts firmly, "I need to learn *everything."* She insists.

He stares at her, blinking several times, and remembers a time when she'd said the same thing. Except then she'd said 'want' and not 'need', and that has him frowning deeply as he stares at her. Sakura stares back, ice blue eyes blazing in a way that makes him think of her mother, and his frown deepens with severity.

“Where do we start next, then?”

He gives her a scroll that she recognizes from her dreams. It’s almost identical to the one her dream-mentor had taught her with, the same instructions for the same jutsu tucked inside, but written with a different hand.

In her dreams, it took her a month to learn the Mystical Palm Jutsu. In her waking life, it takes three weeks - mostly because her chakra is a *pain in the ass.*

“This was easier once.” Sakura mutters without thinking. The phrasing should feel wrong - it had been easier in her dreams, not in her *past* - but it doesn’t.

She’s too distracted to dwell on that.

Her chakra pools are bigger now - much, much bigger - and that makes it harder for her to grasp the delicacies of the jutsu. It makes her gnaw on her lip, anxiously recalling a certain jutsu that left a certain mark on her forehead, and wonders if that’s something she’ll even be able to do again. That had taken *so much* control in her dreams, and that control was so much more difficult.

But she learns the jutsu in three weeks in spite of that struggle, so perhaps…

Perhaps it isn’t as far of a stretch as she thinks.

“Dad,” Sakura questions with a small frown one day after training with Unabara-sensei, when she’s sitting in his office and studying medical text on in depth human anatomy. She already *knows* it all, but it’s in the back of her head, and reading about it again is like relearning it all, bringing that knowledge back to the forefront.

"Hm?” Her father questions from his desk, scribbling away at some mission assignment.

She thinks of the black haired and yellow haired boys, thinks of how *badly* she’d wanted to protect them in her dreams, and frowns down at her book. “Can I learn more?” She asks, her voice one of

contemplative longing.

He pauses, pen freezing for a moment before he looks up at her. She looks over and meets his gaze, frowning softly, and he frowns back.

"...What do you want to learn next?"

Sakura grins eagerly at him.

This time, she thinks, *I'll be able to protect everyone I love.*

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

"Waves,
Picking you up,
Pushing you down,
They're always around,"

Sakura masters the Tiger's Fury style within a year, as promised.

Well, 'masters'. She's learned all that she can be taught by Unabara, and now it's up to her to use it in combat and really *master* it. "You'll be a powerful force at this rate, Sakura-hime." Unabara says as she eyes the seven year old. "You're young. Ridiculously young. But you're even more ridiculously *smart.* I have faith in you."

Sakura smiles at her brightly, remembering two other sensei's. One had told her the same, and the other, she knows, had at least *thought it.* Even if he never said it.

That was just how the Kakashi in her dreams was, she remembers.

"What next?"

"Nothing." Unabara says with a shrug and Sakura blinks at her in surprise. "My job here is done." The jōnin offers, raising her hands helplessly at her sides. "I've got nothing left that'll be useful for you. So keep at the usual stuff, I suppose. You're an Uzumaki. Learn some seals. Something you can use in combination with taijutsu."

Sakura wrinkles her nose a bit at that but nods.

She dreams of a boy with blonde hair and a seal on his stomach and knows she should learn as much about seals as she can, to help the person she cares so much about in her dreams. But seals aren't her forte, she'd learned quickly enough.

She still studies them, though. Knowledge is power. Even if she doesn't plan to use seals regularly, she still needs to *understand* them.

"I *know* you've been learning other things in your downtime - keep working on them. And talk to your father." The woman suggests with a sigh. "I'm sure he has something more for you."

And he does.

Sakura goes to his office immediately after, and the first thing he does is hand her a small square of paper. “I talked to Unabara-san. She says she’s wiping her hands clean of you. Good job.” Her father says with a grin. “Now put some chakra in this.”

Sakura looks down at the paper with new understanding, dream memories clicking into place. Chakra paper to determine her nature.

She gives it a small zap and the paper instantly soaks through, slumping pathetically against her fingers. She looks up and her father is positively *beaming* at her.

“Water. Perfect.” He says with a grin, shoving away from his desk and yanking his robes off. He tosses them carelessly on his chair, leaving him in the usual Uzushio shinobi uniform, sans the vest. “Come with me, then. Work can wait.”

Sakura eyes him, remembering a certain woman with a penchant for ditching work, and frowns suspiciously. “Are you sure?”

Her father shoots her a wounded look. Then he glances back at the desk, frowns a little, and shrugs. “Probably. Let’s go.” He declares, scooping up the katana propped against his desk before sweeping out of the office.

She rolls her eyes but follows him to the nearest training ground. “You probably figured it out by now,” Her father starts off once they’ve settled in, “but I was given the name Akataki for my skill in water jutsu.”

“The ‘taki’ part implied that.” Sakura admits and his lips give a faint twitch, his face otherwise unusually serious.

“I didn’t rise to this position without a reason, Sakura.” Her father tells her seriously, setting his sword against a boulder and turning his full attention to her. “You’re young. Too young, most would think - but you’re also too smart by half. You know what this world is like. You know what it is to be a shinobi - and you know what I must’ve done to earn my position in this village.” He says severely.

Hokage.

The word lingers on the tip of her tongue but it stays there, locked behind her closed lips, because it isn’t right. He isn’t Hokage. He isn’t

even a Kage, Uzushio's far too small for that. But he's the closest thing to it - the Village Head. A military commander and a civilian leader in one.

But like a Kage, one doesn't reach such a position of power without proving themselves worthy - and from a shinobi's standpoint, that means a death toll.

"I know." Sakura confirms quietly.

"I was a chūnin when the First Shinobi War started." He tells her, leaning back against the rock, his sword propped beside him. "I never enjoyed the bloodshed. No sane man does. But I had my reasons to fight - everyone does. The Land of Fire is our brother country, did you know that? *Konoha* is our brother."

She nods at this, remembering this from her history lessons in this life.

"We share a bond, our countries, forged by blood in both marriage and battle. We fight together. We die together. And we founded our villages together. The Uzumaki bloodline flows through both Konoha and Uzushio, binding us together. When Konoha went to war, we followed without hesitation." He pauses for a moment at this, frowning down at the ground before returning his gaze to her. "Konoha believes in the Will of Fire. It's what drives them to war, to fight, to even kill. What do you think drove me to kill, Sakura? To cut a swath so bloody that it took me from a chūnin to a celebrated commander in three years time?" He asks quietly.

It's a heavy question. Too heavy for any seven year old, really - but Sakura's only sometimes seven. The rest of the time she's seventeen, and that allows her to give the question the thought it deserves - even if it doesn't take her long to draw the conclusion.

It is, after all, the same thing that drives her. Her 'Will of Fire'.

"The desire to protect." She decides and her father takes only a moment to smile, soft and vaguely unhappily.

"Yes. And that's what drives you too, isn't it?" He asks quietly. She nods immediately and his lips twitch at that. "I figured. Healing, Sakura? To learn both healing and combat at the same time, to be mastering both at a speed even I couldn't hope to match…" He trails off for a moment before he smiles warmly at her. "You truly are my daughter, aren't you? You've inherited my genius and carried it so much further that you make *me* look slow. But more importantly,

you've inherited my drive, and your mother's determined stubbornness to make it even worse." He chuckles softly and Sakura can't help but grin, preening a bit.

"You're our daughter, there's no doubt about that. Uzumaki blood is strong in your veins. But stronger than that is our will, inherited by you - and one day, someday soon at this rate, you'll surpass us all." Her father pushes himself to his feet, approaching her. "So I think it's time we start to work, you and I. I'm going to teach you everything I know - and one day, hopefully sooner rather than later, *you* can be the one doing all the damn paperwork." He huffs out.

She's still processing the idea of someone thinking her capable of being village *leader* when he throws the first jutsu at her.

Akataki is the only name she really knows her father by. Everyone calls him that - *everyone,* even her own mother sometimes. The Red Waterfall.

A master water jutsu and kenjutsu wielder, legendary for his ability to cut his opponents down with sword and water alike. The blood was said to mix with the water in such numbers that it would turn his water jutsus red - though Sakura knows well enough that that's exaggerated.

But by how *much,* she doesn't know.

She *does* know with certainty that the man is a jutsu *genius.*

By the time she's eight, she's learned more jutsu from him than she'd learned in her entire dream life. She's officially been her father's apprentice for nearly ten months by the time he sits her down and tells her about becoming a chūnin.

"At this point, it's practically a *joke* to send you through the exams." He admits. "You've been ready for it since you were six, really. But… Uzushio is small, though she is strong, and that means we're a target. Any time we were on the battlefield in the War, Uzushio's shinobi were the first to be targeted, and that's for a damn good reason. We're small, but we're *strong.* " Her father says firmly, a hint of darkness behind his eyes.

“So I waited. This year, the exams are being held in Konoha. I can trust that you’ll be safe there, so I’m sending you. It’s in a month. I’ll break the news to your mother, so be ready to endure some coddling tonight. Get ready for it - I’ll introduce you to the two other genin going with you, so use the month to practice teamwork with them. You’ll need it to get through this.”

And with that announcement, he abandons her in the training yard, leaving her blinking rapidly in confusion at the abruptness.

“...Okay.”

She’s dreamt of the Chūnin Exams. Of a giant forest with giant creatures and a monstrous man who had made the black haired boy scream in pain. Of the idiot blonde boy confronting someone far too strong, and her having to protect them after. She remembers being proud of getting beaten half to death but refusing to bend.

This time, she isn’t beaten half to death. This time, the Chūnin Exams really *are* a joke. She’s trained, skilled, and surpasses the other two genin assigned to her - even though they’re twelve and thirteen respectively and she’s just eight.

Luckily, they don’t seem too perturbed by the age difference. One of them, Akira, just shrugs it off. “I mean, her father *is* the Village Head.” He points out to their other teammate, a kunoichi named Shinku.

“Hey, some of the skill is my own.” Sakura complains against the disregard of her training.

Akira shrugs again.

Sakura huffs and ignores him.

Together, they *blaze* through the exams and straight to the final round of one-on-one matches. Sakura had defeated her opponent easily enough, though she’d ended up having to focus on her taijutsu to defeat him. He’d just earth jutsus to combat her water ones, which had made it difficult for her to show off a bit. Instead of making it a flashy fight, she’d had to make it a quick one, deciding to dazzle the judges by taking the Iwa genin out with rapidfire taijutsu.

He'd put up a good fight for a genin - good enough that he might get promoted - but one on one, the Hidden Dragon style really *was* hard to stand against.

Shinku, unfortunately, didn't pass the finals. It was an unlucky pairing, really, and Shinku simply hadn't been the stronger one. Apparently, she was an earth jutsu user - rare, but not terribly so, for an Uzushio shinobi - and she was paired against a Kumogakure genin. She was pretty jutsu-focused and the Kumo shinobi had known enough jutsus to counter hers.

In the end, she lost - but she'd put up an admirable fight, in Sakura's opinion.

Akira, on the other hand.

Akira made even *her* fight look ridiculous.

The genin was, apparently, a seal master in training, and he made the practice look like a work of *art.* Sakura could only watch in fascination as the boy dueled, using tags, quick brushes, and even just summoning seals with his palms to take out his opponent. From paralysis to explosions to chakra draining seals, Akira took the - frankly much stronger - Konoha shinobi down with far too much ease.

Sakura watches the fight with intense focus, attention narrowed mostly on the chakra draining seal the boy had laid down with just a touch of his hand - and the beginnings of an idea churn in her mind.

Being in Konoha is *weird.*

It looks so much like the world of her dreams, but so very different at the same time. There is no Kakashi or Sasuke or Naruto. There's not even the same faces on the cliffs. The village is smaller, less sprawling, and the Hokage is *wrong.* The name doesn't fit the face that she remembers. Hiruzen Sarutobi, younger than she thinks he has the right to be. He looks barely fifty, hair more brown than gray, without liver spots or half as many wrinkles as she saw in her dreams.

The shinobi don't even wear Uzushio's symbol on their vests now.

This Konoha is *wrong,* and she couldn't be happier than when they return to Uzushio.

The entire way there, Sakura turns her new idea over and over in her head until she's come up with a basic plan - and then she accosts Akira the moment they're home.

"I need your help with a seal." She says after she's hunted him down.

He blinks at her from his doorway, looking utterly bewildered. "...Okay?" He offers uncertainly.

"I need to know how to place a seal with my hands."

"...Okay." He repeats slowly.

"And I want to channel a jutsu through the seal."

"Alright?" Akira frowns a bit now, finally looking more attentive.

"A really complicated jutsu."

"...Okaaay…"

"On a person." She specifies.

He blinks, then frowns deeply, his brow furrowing. "How complicated?"

She considers for a moment how to respond vaguely enough to not give away potential trade secrets. "A jutsu that will have to be constantly channeled through the person's circulatory system, channeled in a way that I can adjust without any difficulty."

"...Okay." Akira opens the door a bit wider. She steps past him and into his apartment, frowning a bit at the bland, yet somehow messy interior. "You realize that'll be insanely difficult? When you use a seal to channel a jutsu you're channeling both the jutsu *and* the seal itself."

"It's fine, I've got great chakra control. Teach me." Sakura commands.

He frowns at her.

"...Please?" She asks, blinking up at him.

Akira sighs heavily. "Yeah, sure. I don't suppose you'll make my life easy and tell me *what* jutsu we're making this seal for? It'll have to be

tied into the seal itself, so without me knowing, I can only do half the job here."

"Half is all I need." Sakura assures him, even though she's not entirely sure of that herself.

She's kicking herself now for not paying more attention to her father's fuinjutsu lessons - but she'd memorized most of what he'd taught her, at least. She knows the *components* of a seal.

She just doesn't know very well how to tie the components together. "Help me out?" Sakura asks Akira earnestly.

The older genin sighs before nodding. "Yeah, yeah, I'll do what I can." He promises.

She grins widely at him, trying to hold back her excitement. His best is all she needs.

It takes two weeks for her father to call her and Akira both into his office and toss a chūnin vest at them both. "Congratulations, sorry but no time for ceremony, please get out I have way too much paperwork after all this." He bemoans, and there really is an alarming amount of paper on his desk, so Sakura just gives him a quick hug and scuttles out of the office.

She follows Akira back to his place, both of them feeling a little underwhelmed by their promotion. "Well. At least we got it?" Akira offers, eyeing his vest skeptically.

Sakura shrugs and pulls it on experimentally.

It takes Akira all of two seconds to snorts softly. "You're eight. You look ridiculous wearing that."

She glares balefully at him for that until she looks at a mirror and immediately shrugs the vest off. It *does* look ridiculous. "I'll figure out something else." She decides.

"Good call. Besides, you're the Village Head's daughter - you can get away with skimping on uniform regulations." Akira points out, already migrating to the table they were using to work on the seal.

The poor wood was covered in paper and ink, but they'd already made good progress.

Sakura had started to subtly weave her jutsu into the seal, and luckily for her Akira didn't recognize it even a little judging by the weird look he shot her when he examined her work. "Well at least you have the connectors right." He said mildly when he'd tried to look it over. She'd just shrugged at that and gotten back to work.

A week later, though, she finds herself hunting down her father, finding him sequestered away in his officer with a peculiar tenseness to him. "Dad?" She questions, frowning a bit at him, and he looks up from the scroll he'd been reading to look at her curiously.

"Hm?"

"Is there a seal to store chakra?" Sakura asks, thinking about the purple diamond her dream-mentor had worn and all its many uses. The seal she herself had used in her dreams.

He blinks at her, lowering the scroll. "You'll have to be more specific."

"To store my own chakra on my body, and then let me release it back into my own system when I need…" Sakura pauses, groping for the right word here. "When I need an overabundance of chakra."

"An overabundance." He repeats blankly, staring at her.

She stares back, mildly confused by his response. "An overabundance." She confirms.

"How much of an overabundance are we referring to here."

"I may or may not be inventing a seal that may or may not require to me to channel chakra into a large number of people, and it may or may not require a *very large supply* of chakra to perform the jutsu on them all at once."

He stares at her.

She continues to stare back.

Her father lifts a hand to his forehead and covers his eyes, exhaling a sigh far heavier than she thinks this situation warrants. She waits patiently, and after nearly a minute he abruptly lowers his hand, nods

decisively, and pushes away from his desk and to his feet. “Alright, follow me, and never, *ever,* show this scroll to anyone. This was invented by Mito Uzumaki herself so *don’t take it lightly.”* Her father instructs sternly before guiding her to the forbidden scroll section of his library.

Later on, she’ll deduce that it’s really weird trying to learn the Yin Seal from *both* her memories and a scroll. Her dream-mentor had taught her with words and demonstration, while the scroll teaches her with written instructions and the seal work itself. Her dream-mentor had adjusted the seal to suit her particular needs, whereas this was the original, untouched version.

It’s a fascinating feeling that goes through her, but a very, very weird one of almost-but-not-quite deja vu.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

"Waves,
Just like a dream,
Silver and green,
We live in between,"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sometimes there's too much in her brain. Sakura feels like she's being squashed, a fist wrapped around her mind, and sometimes she feels like there's so *much* stuffed in there that it hurts. Other times, the excess memories just seem to slip away, fading into the background. They're never gone, but sometimes they aren't quite *there,* constantly behind her eyes and bothering her with the vividness *her* memories have.

And sometimes it feels like they're both hers. Both the dream memories and her own memories.

Sometimes she can't tell where the line is, and sometimes the line is so solid she can easily - but briefly - forget that she even dreams like she does.

And then sometimes they snap back into the forefront so hard it's like a slap to the face.

She's nine years old, and tensions are higher than ever.

"War?" Sakura murmurs, looking over the desk at her father. She's just returned from a mission with a chūnin named Hikaru - a kenjutsu and taijutsu focused fighter that had worked pretty well in combination with her styles.

"Possibly." Her father confirms quietly, his chair half-turned so he can look out the windows behind him. The sky is blue and clear of any clouds, the sun shining down and making the distant ocean sparkle.

The peaceful beauty of it is completely at odds with the tension in the room. *Possibly,* his mouth says.

Definitely, her brain says.

“Father.” She starts haltingly, looking blankly down at his desk. “How many years ago did the First War end?”

Her father pauses at that, glancing briefly towards her and frowning. “...Twenty one.”

Sakura closes her eyes.

Twenty one years.

Suddenly, she all too vividly remembers sitting in a classroom and listening to a man with a scarred face tell them about the Second Shinobi War - which had started twenty three years after the end of the First.

“War.” She repeats.

“Possibly.” He repeats quietly. After a long moment, he turns towards her. “I’m sending you on another mission. B-Rank. You leave tomorrow - a three man party. It’s important. You’ll be meeting a messenger from Konoha at the border - Hikaru will go with you, since you worked so well together. I’m sending Unabara with you as well, for protection.”

“Delivering or retrieving.” Sakura asks blankly, mind still whirring at the resurfacing memories. The Second Shinobi War, and it’s just around the corner.

And she *only just remembered.*

“Delivering. I need information. Sarutobi-sama will provide it.” Her father says darkly enough that Sakura’s gaze flickers to his, focusing at last.

“Dad,” She says uncertainly, unnerved by the pensive and grim expression he wears. He holds her gaze steadily, not a hint of hesitation or uncertainty on his face. Just calm, unwavering *grimness.* She’s at a loss for a moment, just staring at him, before she swallows thickly. “When do I leave?”

He reaches out and snags a scroll from his desk without taking his eyes off hers, offering it. “Eight in the morning. Go rest while you can.”

She takes it with numb fingers and leaves, wondering what kind of dreams she'll be having tonight.

She doesn't dream about the war - but in the morning, she focuses her thoughts and remembers more and more.

The Second Shinobi World War. It started twenty-three years after the end of the First one, and lasted until the Five Great Nations had burned through their forces.

It had taken nine years of war for that to happen.

Nine years.

Sakura forces her worries away during the mission, but after they deliver the scroll and return to her father's officer, they return full force.

She finds herself in her room, alternating between anxious pacing and furiously scribbling down something else important she's managed to scrounge from her memories.

The War starts in spring that year, so nearly two full years away… no, closer to a year and a half…

"Uzushio." Sakura murmurs under her breath, closing her eyes and leaning forward against her desk.

Uzushio.

What had happened to Uzushio?

She thinks and she thinks but she can't remember ever learning about Uzushio in her dream-academy. But something had happened to it.

The blonde haired boy, Naruto Uzumaki, whose name had never seemed to trigger recognition. Uzushio's symbol etched on the back of every Konoha vest, something they hadn't had during her stay for the Exams.

Something had happened. She remembers that. Uzushio…

Uzushio had fallen.

But *how?*

When?

She can't remember, no matter how hard she tries. She can't remember anyone ever *speaking* about it - just Naruto's name and the symbol on the back of their vests.

Uzushio was gone. It had to have been. It's the *only reason* she can think of to explain no one speaking of it, but still *respecting* it via the carrying on of their symbol. A token of remembrance to the death.

But was it a token of shame or a sheer level of grief for them to never speak of them again.

What could possibly have happened to Uzushio that *no one would speak of it?*

What could possibly be so horrible that their closest ally, their *brother country,* wouldn't want to even remember them?

Sakura's ten when she finishes the seal. Her father is the first one she shows it to.

"Watch." Sakura instructs, reaching out to tap his forearm, sleeve rolled back to expose it to her. He observes with curious eyes as a small seal settles against his skin. "Er." Sakura blinks, then frowns a bit. "Cut yourself."

He arches a brow at the phrasing before he pulls up a kunai and goes for his forearm.

"No, no. Somewhere else. Away from the seal." Sakura says quickly. His brow arches higher and he reaches up to cut his cheek open instead.

Sakura concentrates, chakra flowing, and the seal against his forearm glows a soft green. The cut on his cheek seals shut, and it takes her father a moment to register - and then he *stares* at her.

“It works.” Sakura announces, grinning as he continues to stare, blinking. Eventually, he looks down and turns his arm, examining the seal closely.

“This is…”

“Incredible work?” Sakura suggests brightly.

“*Ridiculous.”* Her father decides instead. She frowns deeply at him. “Completely… *utterly ridiculous.”* He says quietly, still staring at the seal. Finally he looks up at her, eyes wide. “Sakura, the- the sheer chakra control this must take. The sheer *potential.* The-” He blinks, eyebrows lifting. “This is why you want to learn the Yin seal.”

“Oh, I already learned it.” Sakura corrects him brightly. “It’s forming. Give it another six months or so.” Sakura shrugs lightly. “But, yes. I just used the Mystical Palm Jutsu through a *seal.”* She proclaims smugly.

Her father stares at her.

“...Gods above. What have your mother and I unleashed.” He asks weakly and Sakura rolls her eyes.

“Honestly, it’s for *healing.* Don’t be dramatic. I’m not taking over the world or anything.”

“This is ridiculous.” He repeats blankly. “Long distance healing. Through a seal.”

“And I can do it on multiple targets, too.” Sakura adds.

“Multiple… targets.”

“*Multiple.* I’m going to the hospital after this and seeing how many I can heal at once. I need to practice if I’m going to be able to use this is combat, after all.” Sakura considers, frowning a bit.

Her father blinks a few more times, and then his gaze slowly focuses on her. “In combat.”

“In combat.” She confirms, expression hardening as she meets his gaze. “War’s on it’s way, dad. I’d have to be blind not to see that.” She tells him and his expression starts to harden, shock fading away at the grim reminder. “And I don’t care if I’m your daughter. I don’t care if you want to protect me. I’m going to be on the front lines, and I’m

going to fight, and I'm going to do it while healing until I can't do both anymore. And then I'll keep fighting until I can't do that anymore. And then I'll go to sleep and start again the next day, and I won't take no for an answer." Sakura says very, very firmly.

She's dreamt a life of being on the sidelines, healing in the background and only fighting when she had no other choice. A life of watching others fight for her while she stayed back, to keep out of the way and to heal the fallen.

She'd been a healer and she'd saved lives. It wasn't a bad life, the one she dreamt, and nothing to be ashamed of - but it wasn't the life she wanted, then or now.

Sakura will never be on the sidelines to helplessly watch ever again.

Her father slowly nods, expression going soft. "There's that determination again. Your mother shining through." He says quietly, nodding again. "Very well, have it your way. But this is going to take all your chakra focus, even for you." He warns and it's her turn to nod.

"I know. I won't be able to use chakra for virtually anything else." She admits, lifting a hand to scratch at her cheek. "I was hoping, if you have the time to spare anymore with all this going on, that maybe you'd teach me some kenjutsu."

He offers her a tiny, sad but proud smile and nods. "Of course. We'll start tomorrow."

Sakura's eleven years old, four foot six, seventy pounds, and war is on the horizon.

She dreams of a life where she becomes a genin at twelve - but in this life, she becomes a jōnin at eleven.

"You've more than earned this, daughter." Her father tells her when he hands her the official papers. She accepts them with a small grin, pleased after a long mission out near the Land of Hot Water.

The smiles and joy are brief, fading away as her father's expression

turns severe. He leans back against his desk, arms folded across his chest, and looks at her intently. “Sakura. You know by now that you’re a genius - a genius that puts other geniuses to shame, frankly.”

She might’ve preened at that if the man didn’t sound so grim. Instead she stands up straight, brows furrowed slightly at the odd conversation, and listens.

“I’ve always known you’d succeed me, and time and time again you’ve proven that assumption to be a true one. One day you *will* be Uzushio’s Village Head. You’ll be their leader, and you’ll need more than just your skill in combat for that role.” He informs her severely.

The words should be good ones. Something to celebrate hearing. The idea of becoming what was effectively the Kage of Uzushio should fill her with joy.

But Sakura’s never honestly wanted *political* power. Just the strength to protect what was hers to protect.

She closes her eyes, thinking about her dreams. About a boy with the name of a forgotten clan, a village that never so much as spoke of their brother country, and she *thinks*.

Uzushio was doomed to fall, and she has no idea how or why.

And then she thinks of that village falling itself. Of a massive crater sitting where homes once had, and a blonde haired woman standing defiantly in its center, giving everything she had and more just to keep her people *alive*.

And, well. That makes things pretty simple, doesn’t it?

Sakura opens her eyes and looks at her father with an expression far more serious than any eleven year old should ever hold. “Where do we start?”

Sakura dreams, and in her dreams she lives a life very different from her own.

She lives in Konohagakure, the daughter of two simple living chūnin,

the student of the Hokage herself, and the abandoned member of what had been Team 7. She's a chūnin herself and a good one, with basic skill in genjutsu and kenjutsu - and the mind of a genius when it comes to tactics and medical ninjutsu.

She lives a life as both apprentice and assistant to the Godaime Hokage, learning under her tutelage both shinobi skills and political skills.

In that, Sakura has an edge in her real life. She already knows the basics. She knows how to write reports, how to file papers, how to organize them, how to label them from C-Rank to S-Rank and even beyond. She knows how to stand there and listen as someone speaks, how to make herself inconspicuous and easily overlooked - or how to stare a man down and force them to choose their words with extra care as they speak to her Hokage.

And, perhaps most importantly, she knows from that life how to *read* a person. How to look into a man with the ease of flipping back the cover of a book.

She's eleven and war is mere months away when Hiruzen Sarutobi walks into her father's office and places himself under her searching gaze.

They exchange the barest of formalities and Sakura lingers back, watching as they settle down for tea. It appears almost casual, but it isn't. Sarutobi - the Sandaime, someone whom she'd respected and mourned in her dream life - isn't here for pleasantries.

He's here for war - and for once, the Konoha shinobi aren't very welcome in Uzushio.

Sakura doesn't remember learning this in her dream-life, but Konoha *started* this war. It was undeniable. The Great Countries had started to edge across the lines of the armistice that had ended the First War - but it was Konoha who had thrown the paper to the wind. All the countries had started shifting their forces into the territories of the minor countries, slowly inching their way towards the neighboring Great Countries - but it was Konoha who had skipped past all the subtleties.

While the other Great Countries had started taking missions a little too close to the borders for comfort, Konoha had taken missions directly over the borders.

As if they didn't even exist.

The last three years could easily be described as a cold war between the Five Great Countries - with all of them stretching the limits but none of them willing to be the ones to push it too far - but Konoha was bringing an end to that.

"Where will you stand, Akataki-sama?" Sarutobi asks quietly, holding his tea carefully as he peers across the table at her father. His hands are exposed, fingers loose around the cup, and his gaze is as steady as his grip is. He's confident.

He knows what her father is going to say.

Sakura's gaze flits to her father, who is outright ignoring his tea. His arms are folded, hands carefully tucked into his sleeves. Where Sarutobi's body language radiates open confidence to an almost challenging point, her father's shields him in tense distrust. His hands hidden, weapons no doubt inside his sleeves - but she and Sarutobi both know he isn't going to grab them. Her father does it only to show his disapproval, his reluctance.

But the answer is clear.

"Uzushio has always stood alongside Konoha, and Konoha alongside Uzushio." Her father says coldly and Sakura closes her eyes. "We will do so again."

She's eleven and the Second Shinobi World War is on the horizon.

And there's nothing she can do.

"Have you done as I requested?" Sarutobi asks her father the next day. Sakura lingers back and to the left of her father, a shinobi by the name of Akihito to his right.

"I have." Her father confirms, hand settling against his desk, fingers loosely twined together. "I had my shinobi spread out and search. We found three potentials - and one who, I think, will do best to satisfy your demands." He says mildly.

Sakura has no idea what the hell he's talking about, but holds her silence and observes as he reaches out to take a folder off his desk. He offers it to Sarutobi, who flicks it open and frowns softly.

"She's a direct descendant?" He questions in surprise, eyebrows lifting as he scans the papers within.

"Great-great-grandniece. The most direct you can have, considering." Her father offers with a shrug. "She's young, and almost impervious to the chakra."

Sarutobi just nods, tucking the folder under his arm and looking at her father. "And does she understand?"

"Of course not." Her father says bitingly, harsher than Sakura's ever heard him speak, but Sarutobi barely blinks at it. Whatever he's done to infuriate her father, he isn't ashamed of it. "The girl's six, almost seven. She barely understands what she's doing herself, much less what's being done to her. You can have the honors of teaching her exactly what's going to happen. Take her and go, Sarutobi - and never ask something like this of me again." He says harshly.

Sarutobi stares at him, a faint flicker of regret across his expression before he nods sharply. "Very well. Have her meet me at the gates at dawn."

"She'll be there." Her father says dismissively, already scooping up a pen and looking down at the paperwork on his desk.

She's never seen her father so angry *or* so blatantly rude before, but Sarutobi seems impassive to it, simply turning and leaving. The second the door shuts behind him, her father drops the pen and lifts both hands to his eyes. "Gods." He exhales harshly.

Sakura bites her lip, looking over at Akihito - but the jōnin's expression is blank, aside from a slight downward twist to his lips. "Father?" She questions, and the man huffs softly, dropping one hand to his desk while the other cradles his forehead.

"I just sent a six year old to Konoha as a *war token,* Sakura." He says quietly, more tired than angry now. He lifts his head, turning to her with a bone-weary expression, and her heart aches a bit for him. "A six year old girl, condemned to a miserable life as a human weapon. This war hasn't even started yet and I'm already having to do things I regret." He murmurs, eyes haunted.

That night, Sakura dreams of an Uzumaki boy with blonde hair and bright blue eyes, and a bubbling red chakra that burns away even his own flesh.

Chapter End Notes

I don't mean to portray Sarutobi in a bad light. I'm going off of what little we know canonically about the Second Shinobi World War and the fact is, we don't know all that much. Nagato claims Konoha started the war, and I'm working off that theory. Sarutobi wasn't a bad guy, but he WAS a military leader, and all we're seeing here is his military stance on things.

I'm sure the guy was torn up inside about the whole 6-year-old soon-to-be Jinchūriki think, going off what we know of his character. But he probably wouldn't have shown that to a foreign leader, after all.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter! Things are only picking up from here!

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> "They can carry you all the way to me,
> They can pull you out to the deep blue sea,
> Oh waves...
> There are waves..."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura's eleven and she's sometimes seventeen, fighting in the Second War and sometimes in the Fourth.

But regardless of which life she's experiencing, one thing remains the same.

No matter what she does, no matter how many people she defends and mends, she goes to bed feeling useless.

She's eleven, and she already knows enough about war to despise it.

"This isn't working." Sakura tells Akira one week into the war as she picks blood out from under her nails. They're in the Land of Hot Water, up against the country's border with the Land of Frost, and they're basically ignoring that the minor countries even exist. They're fighting in their land, against their borders, but they aren't fighting their people. No, it's Konoha and Uzushio against Kumo, all of them acting like this territory is theirs to fight for, and it grates on her nerves.

One week, and already she's seen entire villages razed just for being in their way.

"What isn't?" Akira asks tiredly, wiping sweat from his brow as they hunker down for the night. It's them, two other Uzushio shinobi named Hitomi and Kobeki, and perhaps forty Konoha shinobi.

Uzushio's small, but she's strong, and they don't need many shinobi at each post to bring a game changing difference - particularly since Hitomi's a seal master and Akira's well on his way to becoming one himself.

“The seal,” Sakura explains, waving a hand vaguely. “It takes too much time and chakra to apply it. I have to pause at each person and channel the chakra to them just to place the seal itself - it takes too much time. Particularly when you realize how many people I’m putting it on.”

Twenty-two in the last battle alone, which had been an exhausting experience. The Yin seal sits on her forehead now, formed and ready to go, but she hasn’t *needed* to use it yet, so she hasn’t.

“So put it on tags.” Akira suggests with a shrug.

“No.” She refuses instantly. “Too cumbersome. I’d have to rifle around for the tags, place them properly, and then activate them. That’d take the same amount of time - and every second is precious when you’re trying to save lives and not die in the process.” She points out.

“So what are you suggesting?” He asks, frowning over at her.

Sakura glances over him and then past, gaze settling on Hitomi. The jōnin sits several yards away, quietly observing the camp with narrowed eyes, but she’s not so far she can’t hear them. Sakura narrows her eyes, examining the woman’s bared arms and the seals etched on them. “Hitomi-senpai?” She calls and the woman looks over, arching a bright red eyebrow. “Can you teach me how to do that with my seal?” Sakura asks, gesturing to one of the many seals, and Hitomi blinks in surprise. She adjusts in her seat so she can face Sakura better, frowning thoughtfully.

“What exactly are you trying to accomplish?” She asks. “I was only paying half attention to your conversation. You want to apply your seal to people with less effort?”

“Essentially. Less time, really.” Sakura explains. “I want to people to apply it instantaneously with just a touch.”

She raises her brow higher. “That’ll be a real pain in the ass when you aren’t in combat.”

She’s not sure what exactly that means, but Sakura just shrugs anyways. “Then I’ll figure it out when I’m not in combat. It’s the *while* in combat bit that I need it for.”

“Yeah, alright. I’ll show you how, then. But you’re probably going to regret it.” Hitomi warns.

“We’ll find out.”

She does sort of regret it. The seal is tattooed - burned, really - into the palm of her left hand. The black lines glow a soft blue, chakra constantly circulating through the seal. That was a factor she’d added in - with the constant chakra flow, all it takes is her touching something for the seal to be applied. She doesn’t have to think about putting the chakra into applying it - it does it automatically for her.

It also means she puts a seal on everything she touches.

Everything.

She’s always had gloves - in this life and her dream one - for when she’s fighting with taijutsu, but now she wears them constantly - even when she sleeps, so she stops applying her seal to her own face in the middle of the night.

It’s exhausting business, but she’s never felt more useful in her life. Every fight, she attacks with taijutsu and kenjutsu - using a katana her mother had gifted her - and the occasional Suiton jutsu. Every time someone falls, she backs off to tag them, then returns to the fight while healing them through the seal.

The healing isn’t *quite* as efficient through the seal as it would be if she were physically there doing it - but with her holding the reigns, the difference is minimal enough.

She’s eleven, and they’re already dubbing her the world’s greatest medical-nin.

It makes her think about Tsunade from her dream-life, and her heart aches strangely.

Sakura turns twelve on the battlefield. “Happy birthday,” Hitomi says dryly, and a couple of the shinobi nearby cheer at that.

She offers them a quick grin, but before she can say anything, someone shouts a warning.

Break is over, and it's back to fighting.

She's on the front for four months before they rotate her and the other three back into Uzushio. Her father greets her with a tight, smothering hug. "Four months," He says quietly when the others have finished reporting in and filed out of his office.

"Four months, and you've already made such a name for yourself." Her father says in a strange tone, reaching up to cup her face and frown at her. "It scares your mother." He informs her. "But I know you can take care of yourself." Her father pauses, arching a brow at her now. "And everyone else while you're at it, apparently." He notes mildly.

She can't help but grin a bit at that, her smile genuine but fleeting. "I did my best." Sakura confirms, trying not to think of where she'd failed.

Their post had started with fifty shinobi, and when Sakura left there had only been thirty of them left - excluding the four Uzushio shinobi, who had all made it out in tact.

"You had the highest survival rate in this wave of detachments. I'd say you're off to an incredible start." Her father says in a weird voice before he steps back, heading for his desk. Sakura follows, settling down in the chair opposite of his. He scoops up a book and offers it to her, thumb slipping in to flip it open. She takes it from him, eyeing the exposed pages.

Her face is printed on one.

"Sakura Uzumaki," She reads off, arching an eyebrow - and ignoring the weird sensation that goes through her as she speaks her surname. "Rank: jōnin. A-Rank." She frowns at that. "I'm offended. I should be an S-Rank, at *least."* She complains and her father rolls his eyes. "Daughter of Uzushio Village Head, Kokei Uzumaki - aka Akataki, the Red Waterfall. Bounty: Ki...ll…. Ah." She trails off, blinking at the entry. "Hm. They don't seem to like me. Who's bingo book is this,

Kumogakure's?" She asks, still stuck on the 'kill on sight' written where a number usually would be.

They don't even want her head. They just want her dead.

"Yes. You should be proud - only the most dangerous get a kill or flee on sight order." Her father says in an uncomfortable sort of way. "Not that I'm *glad* for it, but it's impressive?" He offers oddly.

Shinobi pride warring with parental protectiveness. "I'm proud of it, I guess." She says slowly, still reading. "Though it seems more like they think of me as a barricade to get past. Kill me to kill the people I put my seals on… This is pretty detailed," Sakura admits. It describes her ability to heal people at a distance, even noting that she touches them first. It urges the readers to isolate her so she can't mend her allies. It also goes on and on about her taijutsu and kenjutsu, as well as a few notes on her water jutsus. "Annoyingly detailed, actually." Sakura decides, flipping the book shut. "What now?"

He shrugs. "Undecided. The book changes nothing, of course - you were always going to draw attention, though you immediately being labeled A-Rank is a bit worrying parentally speaking. By the way, we're telling your mother nothing of this." He adds quickly and she nods. "The Hokage wants me to assign you to the Iwa-Suna crossroads. More accurately, he wants me to send you into Amegakure's territory." Her father says darkly.

"And what does Uzushio's Head want?" Sakura counters with an arched brow and his lips twitch faintly.

"To tell him to fuck off." He admits, any amusement draining away. His expression darkens like a storm's come over him and she immediately frowns in concern. "The man's done enough, don't you think? Already this war has painted a target on my daughter's back. And on my *village,* for that matter. How many lives are we going to lose for a war we have no business in? A war we could easily have stayed out of?" He scowls, turning to glare out the window. It's a clear day, too lovely and bright for a conversation like this. "He wants me to send you into the heart of the conflict now, hoping your success in keeping his people alive at the Kumo frontline will carry on."

"And maybe it will." He shrugs, shaking his head sharply. "But I don't care to find out. Amegakure is a *clusterfuck* already, and Suna's only just entered the damn war." He bites off at that, taking a breath, and Sakura cuts in quietly.

“Any word on Kiri?” She asks and he grimaces, shaking his head.

“Dead silence. Almost worse than if they’d just enter the fray already.” He says, voice quieting. His brow furrows, concern making its way into his expression, and both of them looking out at the ocean. “We’re in the crossfire here. If they join this war, they’ll go for Kumo or Konoha - and we’re between them and both. Maybe, *maybe* they’ll ignore us if they’re going for Kumo… but if they’re going for Konoha…”

“They’ll hit us first.” Sakura realizes aloud, her eyebrows pulling together at that.

She thinks about Konoha and the flak jackets that don’t-but-will carry the symbol of Uzushio on their backs. She thinks about Naruto and his surname being all but forgotten to history, and wonders.

“What do we do when that happens, father?” She asks quietly.

When, not if, and his lips twist down grimly.

“I honestly don’t know.”

Uzushio is a city of seals. She’s built on them, built *with* them, and seals are built around her. They reinforce the barrier seals and the trap seals scattered around the bay, and by the time Sakura goes back out to the war front two months later, Uzushio’s more secure than she’s been since the First War.

She’s still uneasy when she leaves. “Be safe,” Her mother murmurs, cupping her cheek with a pained expression.

“I will be, mom.” Sakura promises, as earnest and serious as a twelve year old can sound. It makes her mother smile, eyes wet and expression maybe just a little bit bitter.

“Good. I’ll see you in four months.”

“I’ll see you then.” Sakura returns, smiling as warmly as she can at the woman before she turns and heads for the village gates.

She’s dreamt every night as she usually does, and she’s thought harder

and harder on the fate of Uzushio - but there's nothing for her to remember. Never, as far as she can tell, was her dream-self taught about the village.

She hasn't gotten so much as a hint as to what happened, much less how to *stop it,* and when Sakura leaves the village to head to the Kumo front, she wonders if it won't be the last time she sees it.

If one day she'll get a message telling her her father was dead and her village gone. If one day she'd come home and it simply wouldn't be there anymore.

She doesn't know.

She *doesn't know,* and that worries her like nothing has before. "Keep her safe." Sakura says quietly to her father as they gather at the gates, gaze roaming over the village behind.

Her party - made of five Uzushio shinobi this time - isn't the only one there. It's one of ten. Fifty shinobi, chūnin and jōnin alike, gathered up to be sent out to their respective posts.

"I will." Her father swears, not having to ask. His gaze darts past her and he nods to the waiting shinobi. "I'll protect the people inside her walls - it's your job to protect the ones outside of them."

"I will." Sakura vows with the utmost determination.

Another four months on the front and this time their detachment is even larger. The fights are bloodier, the death count is higher, and Sakura struggles to keep them together.

Akira is with the detachment again, but the other three are shinobi she barely knows.

One of them will never come back to Uzushio with them.

The war goes on.

Sakura remembers a life that both is and isn't her own. She remembers being a bullied child, and she remembers being a cherished one. She remembers a girl named Ino helping her find her confidence, and she remembers being confident from the day she was born.

She remembers a carefree childhood and one full of excitement and learning. She remembers turning twelve and still being a student, and she remembers turning twelve covered in blood and still fighting.

She remembers a life where she'd grown up loving Konohagakure and all of it's people - but she'd living a life where she hates them.

"This war isn't ours." Sakura says quietly as she catches her breath, leaning heavily on her sword. It doesn't help much - she's still channeling chakra into her seals, scattered across the bodies lying on the ground and those still fighting. Some of the seals have faded away, disappearing like they had never been there.

She's trying not to think about those.

It's not going well.

"It never is." The man beside her points out, sounding more composed even if he's as bloody and filthy as she is. Akihito - the man who usually serves as her father's right-hand man - had been teamed with her on this deployment. Entirely unsuspiciously, he's clung to her side like a leech.

A very, very protective leech.

She isn't complaining for it - the man's swordwork is better than hers, almost as good as her father's, and she can see why he's here. Akihito moved like he'd been fighting at her father's side for years - and she can only assume he *had* been.

Doubtlessly that was why her father had sic'd the man on her, and the loyal jōnin has been plastered to her side ever since they stepped foot out of Uzushiogakure together.

Another seal fades away, the chakra flow cutting off abruptly, and the sensation makes her snarl. "Why are we *here,* senpai?" She demands, waving out with her free hand - black seals that are glowing a soft blue, but it's impossible to see either under all the blood. "Why are

we-” Another seal gone and she curses viciously. Sakura stops talking, instead ripping her katana from the ground and striding furiously back into the fray with Akihito at her heels.

She remembers from her dream world hearing tales of this place. Hearing of the death toll beyond number, the unspeakable collateral damage, and their own Village Head focusing on fighting instead of *protecting his people.*

She remembers hearing about all of the horrors, and of the scars they had left in the land and its people. Hearing about it, she reflects as she ducks under a fire jutsu and lunges to gut its user, was nothing compared to *living* it.

She wishes she’d never agreed to go to Amegakure.

The next detachment to Amegakure had the largest group of Uzushio shinobi sent out en masse. To every other station, Uzushio shinobi went in groups ranging from pairs to a maximum of six.

To Amegakure, they went out in groups of twenty.

Eight of them come home.

“I’ve never seen you so angry.” Her father notes quietly, two days after their return. They’re not in his office for once, but rather just outside it, overlooking Uzushio from his balcony. Sakura’s hands grip the railing as tight as she can, her breaths perfectly even.

“I’ve never *been* so angry.” She corrects - and it’s true. In this life and her last, she’s never been *so angry*. It’s an anger that burns deep in her stomach, radiating out and making her hands shake in its fierceness.

Twelve bodies, that’s all that she can think about. One of them had been forty-eight. Another had been twelve.

“I hate this, father.” Sakura confesses, with all the bitter force a thirteen year old girl can carry.

Her birthday had been a week ago, en route from Ame to Uzushio. She’d still had blood under her nails.

“No one likes it, Sakura.” Her father says almost chidingly.

“Hanzo does.” She snaps instantly, glaring out at the ocean, somehow even more incensed by the thought of Amegakure’s leader. She can see the whitecaps of the waves and she can imagine the noise of them hitting the rocky shore. She *wants* it to soothe her but it doesn’t.

She feels angrier than she should, she thinks. In her dreams, she hadn’t been this angry over the war.

But in her dreams, she hadn’t felt betrayed by it, either.

Konohagakure had been her home in her dreams. The Sandaime Hokage, her hero.

But Uzushio is her home now, and the Hokage had thus far failed them miserably. “We’re fighting a war with no purpose.”

“Sakura.” Her father warns, but not unkindly, and he steps up beside her. His hands wrap around the railing just beside her own, the breeze tugging at his sleeves, and he looks out at the ocean instead of at her. “We’re fighting a war to save lives.”

“That doesn’t make *sense.*” Sakura protests instantly and he huffs softly, making her fall silent.

“You forget yourself, Sakura.” He says gently, looking over at her. His expression is calm but grim, sorrowful in a way that makes her feel young and uneasy. “We aren’t in this war to take or protect territory. We aren’t in it for vengeance or careless bloodlust. We’re in this war for Konoha.”

“Because of.” Sakura bites out and he shoots her a reprimanding look for that.

“For Konoha.” He restates firmly. “Alliances mean so little in these times, but I remember a time when they meant everything. When they meant living and dying for one another.” He says, looking back out at the ocean. “Our alliance with Konoha was written with the spilled blood of our enemies and the shared blood of our peoples. We’ve

always fought together, from beginning to end. Uzushio stands alone and so does Konoha, that's true enough - but we stand alone, together."

He falls silent after that and Sakura doesn't break it, watching the distant waves and clenching her jaw so tight it hurts.

She wants to accept his point. She *understands* it.

But… "Alliances aren't good enough to defend this, father." She says quietly, closing her eyes and breathing in the smell of the sea. "You'd understand that if you saw Amegakure for yourself."

There's a long minute of silence. "...Perhaps," Her father offers slowly, "but that does not change our position. Konoha would do the same for us."

Sakura violently shoves away from the balcony. "Uzushio wouldn't use Konoha shinobi as glorified meatshields." She snarls before storming off the balcony, ignoring the tight expression her father wears as she passes by.

Her father hadn't been to Amegakure. He hadn't seen the way the other villages had zeroed in on their people, their priority to eliminate the power houses and seal masters that made up Uzushio's forces.

He hadn't seen it - but she had.

Chapter End Notes

> I just want to add super quickly that I really, really like Sarutobi - and there's no way in hell I'm going to bash him. But part of the reason why I like Sarutobi's character so much is because of the whole two-sides-of-a-coin thing he had going on. We see his love and protectiveness of his village during the first arc - but in flashbacks, we see him for the military leader he was, too.
>
> As for Sakura, well. She's getting her first taste of a nice, traditional, secret-alien-overlord-free war. She's handling it as well as can be expected.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> "Empires will crumble to the sand,
> All that you love,
> Can slip through your hand..."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the privacy of her own mind, Sakura *knows* that Konoha doesn't see them a glorified meatshields like she'd claimed. She remembers being young and meeting the Sandaime before she'd joined the Konoha Shinobi Academy. She remembers his kindness, how *genuine* he was.

She knows that man, and that man wouldn't be fighting this war without struggle and regrets.

But Sakura doesn't know that that man is the same man leading Konoha now. For all she knows, his callousness with lives during this war was what had *made* him so peaceful and kind.

For all she knows, he can barely sleep at night. For all she knows, he doesn't even spare a thought to Uzushio's losses.

She doesn't *know,* but that doesn't stop her from feeling betrayed.

"You should rest." Her mother says quietly and Sakura twitches slightly, startled. The woman is behind her, her father's robes wrapped around her much smaller frame, and her hands hug the cloth close to herself.

Sakura exhales a slow breath, uncurling hands that she hadn't realized she'd had fisted. "I can't." She admits, keeping her voice as quiet as she can. Her mother is a civilian (and not a blonde haired chūnin like she sometimes dreams) and she's too kind for the things Sakura wants to unleash from her lips.

She'd had to carry a twelve year old's mutilated body home just a week ago.

His hair was so red she couldn't tell if he was an Uzumaki or just that drenched in his own blood.

“You should try.” Her mother murmurs, stepping up to the edge of the deck. She sits down delicately, robes pooling around her, and looks out at the frozen koi pond in the yard. It’s late January, but it’s been a colder year than usual. Uzushio rarely saw snow as often as it had so far this year.

“I did.” Sakura huffs out softly, allowing her mother to take her hand. The woman cradles it in both hands, warming the chilled limb, and Sakura closes her eyes. “I hate this.” She says, and she also hates how childish it sounds.

“I’d be more concerned if you didn’t.” Her mother offers in response, frowning out at the koi pond. “Your father won’t tell me much about what’s going on, so I can only assume it’s terrible.” She says quietly and Sakura blinks, startled. “Which is unfortunate, because both of you seem very in need of someone to talk to.” She says lightly before pulling one of her hands away from Sakura’s. She wraps her arm around Sakura’s shoulders, drawing the small girl into her side and holding her hand gently. “So, then. Let’s find something we *can* talk about, hm? Met any cute boys lately?”

Part of her instantly cringes inside at the thought of finding someone her age *attractive,* while the other part is just stunned stupid.

After a long moment, all she can do is laugh helplessly.

Her mother finally looks sideways at her and her smile is so warm there’s nothing Sakura can do but return it.

This, Sakura thinks, is the time she hates Konoha most of all.

“How many?” Her father asks hoarsely, staring out the window. Her father’s office is full of shinobi, pale faced and determined.

The expressions of people who know they’re going to die but won’t hesitate to do it anyways.

Uzushio is small, but she’s always been strong, and as she looks at their faces, Sakura can *feel* her strength.

“Two hundred ships spotted so far.” Kaito, a jounin seals master, says grimly.

The room seems to be holding it’s breath - or maybe it’s just so tense that *she* can’t quite breathe.

She can’t see the ships from her father’s window, but there’s no doubt that they’re there.

“How many traps have they gotten past?”

“Three layers, sir. Twenty-five or so ships have been lost.”

Sakura closes her eyes and slowly breathes through her nose. There were seven layers of traps in the oceans around Uzushio. Twenty-five ships lost to three and still more than two hundred on the way.

Silence fills the room for several seconds - though they feel like minutes - before her father speaks. “Well.” He starts mildly. “The circumstances could be better, but we’ve always known that Kiri loves to make an entrance.”

Someone snorts in a show of horribly grim humor.

“Little better, yeah.” Someone else speaks up and Sakura squeezes her eyes shut tighter at the voice. Unabara, she recognizes instantly.

“Sakura.” Her father begins firmly, hands settling on her shoulders, and she opens her eyes as he turns her towards him. She looks up at his face - expression warm and loving and so, so apologetic. “My beautiful daughter.” He says quietly, one hand shifting to cup her face. “You’re not a woman grown yet, but you’ve been one in mind practically since you were a babe. I have no doubt you’ll resent me for this, but I know you’ll forgive me.”

Sakura grimaces, trying to ignore the other presences in the room. There are just under twenty shinobi in his office, lingering in the corner of her eyes, and all of them are waiting on her father’s words.

“You are my successor.” He says with the utmost finality and her eyes slip shut once more, a pained breath leaving her. “You will leave, now, the second I’m done talking. Akihito will go with you. His job is to protect you - but your job is to protect *them.* The people.” Her father instructs firmly, one hand gripping her shoulder almost painfully tight and the other gently cupping her cheek. “Get as many people as you can, Sakura.” He urges and she forces herself to open

her eyes and meet his gaze. “Get them out of here. Get them to safety. I know you’ve thought about it - I know you’ve worried about this. You have a plan, don’t you?”

“Yes.” She says very, very quietly and he nods, lips twisting up in a painful smile.

“You always do, my darling girl. Take them. Take as many people - citizens and shinobi. Anyone you find, order them to follow you. You’re the Village Head now, daughter. They’re your responsibility. Get them safe.” He tells her firmly, and before she can do more than stare up at him, he drops his hands and turns to the waiting shinobi. “The rest of you are coming with me. Our jobs are to buy these two enough time to do theirs.” He says, stepping away from her to pull his katana from the side of his desk. Akihito slinks away from the others, falling silently into place at her side.

“Wait.” Sakura cuts in quickly, and before anyone can ask, she pulls her glove off her left hand. It only takes a few seconds to tap everyone in the room with it, planting a faintly glowing seal on their shoulders.

When she nods and steps back, the others don’t even hesitate to move towards her father - who offers her a small nod of proud approval before looking at his people severely. “We’re going to meet them head on. They’ll be through the barrier any minute, so let’s get moving.” He commands sharply, heading for the balcony. The others follow in an instant, flickering to the nearby rooftops fast as she can blink, and Sakura watches them go with a twisting sensation in her stomach.

She feels sick.

She feels *beyond* sick.

She feels a nauseating kind of hopeless desperation that she’s never felt before - except once, in her dream life, when she had to wrap her fist around her best friend’s heart just to keep him alive for a little bit longer.

But there’s no keeping these people alive.

There’s no saving her father, or Unabara - or her mother, who’s at home on the wrong side of the island for Sakura to rescue her.

No, Sakura has a plan for escape - a very tentative plan that hinges on a lot of luck - and it has her going in the complete opposite direction.

The realization makes her feel like someone's choking her. "Father," She calls in a strangled voice and he looks back at her, perched on the balcony railing and ready to spring away. "Mother. I won't- I can't…"

Her father offers her a tired smile, breaking off her failed attempts at speech. Her eyes burn with tears that she can't *hope* to stop. "It's alright, Sakura. She'll understand." He promises her, and the smile vanishes, replaced by grim determination. "I love you. Now get the *hell* out of here." He barks before he disappears in a quick flicker - the other shinobi vanishing after him.

Sakura watches for a moment.

Just a moment.

Then she wipes her tears on her glove and turns to Akihito. "Let's go. We need to get to the western bridge - grab everyone we find on the way." She says sharply, heading for the balcony with Akihito at her side. When they turn to flicker away, though, it's in the opposite direction her father had gone. Her eyes narrow dangerously, rage simmering and warring with grief in her stomach, and she takes a breath. "Let's just hope Konoha really does care about us." Sakura mutters grimly before flickering away, Akihito just behind her.

She prays her father's faith in the village - and her dream self's - was not in vain.

Because if Konoha isn't waiting at the other end of the bridge, they'll all be dead by nightfall.

It takes twenty minutes to reach the bridge. By the time they do, they've grabbed two dozen shinobi on the way. All it takes is a quick command and they fall in line with her and Akihito, some with grace and some with terror. "Akataki-sama's leading a force to hold Kiri off. It's our job to get people to safety with the time he buys us."

Kiri reaches land before they reach the bridge. Only halfway there, the explosions start. Then the screams and the smoke, off in the distance and impossibly painful to ignore. But they ignore them. They ignore the screams, and they ignore the fact that they all have friends and family facing down Kiri's forces right that moment - while they turn and run in the other direction.

But it's something they must do.

Sakura carefully channels chakra through her seal, but they aren't even at the bridge before the first seal disappears on her. *Damn,* she thinks, throat tight. *"Yin Seal: Release!"* She hisses under her breath.

The seal on her forehead unfolds, blooming out across her skin like a flower - but the violet lines of chakra turn to harsh, solid black lines. *Strength of a Hundred,* she thinks, and channels her chakra.

The Strength of a Hundred, flooding into seventeen shinobi all at once, channeled by her.

Shishō would be proud, Sakura thinks as she runs.

There are over two hundred citizens swarming the bridge by the time they arrive, and Sakura swallows back her grief, focusing on the task at hand. "Everyone," She says as she moves between the shinobi, tagging them as quickly as possible. "Form up behind the civilians, and form one line in front. We must get these people to safety!" Sakura commands, putting as much force into her voice as she can. It wavers slightly with grief and pain, but they obey immediately. She goes in front of the group, Akihito at her side, and Akira at her other.

The only two shinobi in the group that she knows beyond mere acquaintance - and that's a painful thought to swallow.

Everyone else…

Well.

If they weren't in the group, their chances of escape were much, much lower.

"Stay with us!" Sakura calls out sharply over the noise of the crowd, and the civilians hurry along the bridge, falling into place between the two lines of shinobi. Most of the shinobi are covering the rear, with only eight of them up front to lead. "Follow the bridge. We'll keep you safe!"

It's not even easy to say that, and it's much harder to keep that promise. It'll take them an hour to cross the bridge, and only thirty minutes in does Kiri start showing up. She can't fight like this, not while almost all her focus is on channeling the *Strength of a Hundred* long distance as she is.

She cuts off the flow, chakra flooding back into the seal and closing off in the shape of a diamond on her forehead.

Within two minutes, almost all of the seals in the distance disappear.

She can't think about that, but she can't ignore it all together either, so she just keeps her eyes forward and her mind on the chakra channeling into the shinobi around them.

"Where the hell is Konoha?" Akira snarls as they struggle along the bridge. A Kiri shinobi gets in a lucky blow and two civilians crumple without a sound, the others screaming. One of the shinobi at the rear kills him before the bodies can even hit the bridge.

Sakura has no answer to offer Akira so she doesn't try, instead forging ahead with a level of intense determination she's never felt before. "Keep moving!" Sakura commands, urging them along.

Akihito's sword snaps a kunai out of the air and Sakura pauses just long enough to draw her sword and pounce on the offending Kiri shinobi.

A woman cries out and with a harsh gurgle, one of Sakura's seals vanish.

She ignores that, falling back into place and keeping her sword loose but ready at her side.

None of her seals are left in Uzushio.

Not one.

She tries to ignore that, too.

It takes an hour to cross the bridge, and half of that is spent in chaos. The back half of their group takes the worst of the damage - losing six

shinobi and nearly thirty civilians in the travel.

It's when they reach the end, though, that something snaps inside Sakura.

Not because Konoha isn't there like she'd feared.

No, Konoha *is* there. But *Kumo* has formed a blockade, locking Uzushio away and in the clutches of Kiri's vicious fleet, while Konoha struggles to breach it.

Her breath leaves her in a harsh, hissing way. "Spear formation!" She barks harshly, feeling like she's on fire and like she's frozen at the same time. The sheer *rage* bubbling in her makes her dizzy. She's angrier than she's ever been before in either of her lives. Even when she'd watched a village be transformed to a crater in an instant, she'd been too stunned and horrified to feel so *angry*.

None of the shinobi - *her* shinobi - hesitate to follow her order. They fall into place with ease, lining up like an upside-down V with her and Akihito at the tip and the civilians clustered safely between the lined up bodies. She raises her katana, and without having to say a word, they rush the Kumo shinobi in a wave.

Like the tip of a spear, her and Akihito carve into the line. The attack would have been effective either way - but it's made much, much more effective when two while lines of chakra fly out in front of them.

Chains, Sakura realizes in surprise, just before said chains whip out and send Kumo shinobi *soaring.*

She follows the lines, glancing briefly over her shoulder, and is surprised to see a bright red haired woman flinging them out left and right, swiping Kumo off their feet like they're made of air itself.

Sakura smiles at her in a grim kind of way and the woman looks back before they both refocus on the fight.

It takes another ten minutes to make it safely through the Kumo line, and by the time they're on the other side, they've lost five more shinobi and forty more civilians.

Akira's gone, and though she didn't see what happened to him, she knows that means he's dead.

The moment they're on the other side, Sakura looks at one of the jōnin she recognizes. "Uma, Tabane, get the civilians out of here." She orders before glancing at the Konoha shinobi quickly piling between them and the Kumo shinobi.

"To Konoha!" Someone calls out, and Sakura looks over to see a pale haired man from Konoha speaking. He approaches quickly, bowing politely to her. "The Village is ready to give you aid. They'll be taken care of."

The idea has her narrowing her eyes, anger churning her stomach.

Konoha was the only reason they're *in* this position.

But… she has a mere dozen shinobi left under her command and perhaps a hundred and fifty civilians to protect.

She swallows thickly and nods, gesturing sharply at the Konoha shinobi. "Will you help protect them on the way there?" She asks and he nods immediately.

"Kobiru! Zaka!" The man calls, two more Konoha shinobi - jōnin from the looks of them - flicker to his side. "Help them reach Konoha safely." He orders.

Sakura waits just long enough to see the civilians get moving before she gestures to the rest of her shinobi - a mere eleven out of the twenty-some shinobi they'd left Uzushio with.

A mere eleven out of what had been *hundreds.*

Another thought that she forces herself to ignore. She looks back to the horizon, past the Konoha and Kumo shinobi, past the bridge and on to the distant island.

It's more smoke than land at this distance, and her stomach twists viciously. "We've called for reinforcements." The Konoha jōnin says grimly. "But there's no telling how long it'll take for them to arrive."

There must be other survivors. Statistically speaking, there *has to be* some survivors out there, either trapped in the rubble or trying to cross the waters via chakra or ship. Kiri's obviously inhumanly vicious, so she doesn't doubt that they've surrounded the island,

breaking away only to avoid the whirlpools the Land was named for.

They'll be picked off, and soon.

She *desperately* wants to go back. She wants to charge back through Kumo's forces to save those civilians and shinobi left behind. She wants it so badly it *hurts*.

But there's only eleven of her shinobi left at her side now.

Thirteen in total, out of what had been *hundreds*, and it makes her feel sick.

She can't risk them on what would essentially be a suicide mission.

"Help Konoha hold the line." Sakura commands hoarsely.

Then she leaps into the fray with Akihito at her side.

They end up not even needing the reinforcements.

Kiri doesn't stay. They don't hold Uzushio - there's nothing left of her. They used their full force to destroy her, and once they were finished and had picked off the strays, they leave with nothing but a bloody *annihilation* accomplished.

And, well, then it's just Kumo. They fight through the night, and Sakura makes good use of her weapons and her seal, helping Konoha push the forces slowly but steadily back to their side of the Hot Water border. She's beyond exhausted by the end of it all and has tapped into her Yin seal twice just to keep her remaining people alive - but alive they are, albeit shaky and bloody.

It does *nothing* to ease her anger, or her grief, or the deep rooted sense of overwhelming betrayal.

"The eastern watchtower says five survivors reached land." The same jōnin as before, mildly familiar now, tells her shortly after sunrise when Kumo's finally reluctantly pulled back. "Two shinobi and three civilians. A woman and her two infants." He explains, and Sakura blinks at him, tired enough that it takes her a moment to figure out how to respond.

“I see. Are they on their way to Konoha?”

“The woman and one of the shinobi are. The other claims he’s retired now and no one can prove otherwise. Seemed to be heading west.” The jounin says, offering a faint shrug.

Sakura snorts in bitter amusement. “That’s fair enough.” She mutters, looking sideways.

Uzushio’s still smoking, but faintly now. “I’m leading a party of Doton users into the ruins. Do you have any that could join us?” He asks grimly and she glances questioningly at her shinobi - still eleven of them, thank the sea - and gets a round of ‘no’s for that.

“Apparently not.” Sakura passes on to the jounin, who nods once. “I need to return to my people. Tell anyone you find that we’re regrouping in Konoha, but that doesn’t mean we’re going to remain there.”

The jōnin blinks in mild surprise before he nods, inclining his head respectfully. “I understand. Thank you for staying as long as you did despite your state, Uzumaki-hime. Your aid was invaluable.”

She blinks at the title. She can barely remember a time when someone referred to her that way - it was before she was a shinobi, at the least. She’d become a shinobi, and shinobi weren’t princesses.

She especially isn’t one now.

All she could be a ‘princess’ of is now a pile of ash and ruin.

She swallows thickly, once, and nods at the jōnin. “It’s Sakura. And they’re my people. I’d fight through fire itself on the off chance of saving even one of them.” She says roughly.

The man’s green eyes soften slightly, and he looks at her with even more respect than before.

It’s eerie, and it makes her head spin worse, because she’s *thirteen*. But then again, they’re shinobi. Skill is what matters, not age.

“Then call me Dan, Sakura.” He offers, and realization hits her.

No wonder she thought he looked familiar. She almost laughs.

Instead she just offers a probably twisted smile and nods before turning to her eleven remaining shinobi. “Let’s go.”

She's thirteen, and there are one hundred and sixty-two of her people left alive. She's bloody, she's battered, and she burned, and most of her people are no better.

She still walks into the Hokage's office the moment she arrives in Konoha, Akihito a silent, constant presence at her side. She doesn't stop to rest or to clean up. She doesn't care about the sight she must make - if anything, it empowers her.

She's angry, she's *furious*, and above all else, she's completely, utterly heartbroken.

But for the moment, she's mostly furious, because Sarutobi's sitting at his desk looking *sad* when she walks in.

She's thirteen, and she's the daughter of the last Village Head of Uzushiogakure, and she walks right up to his pretty pastel yellow chair and sinks her blood-soaked body into it. She leans back, sets her elbows on the cloth armrests, and twines her fingers together across her stomach. She looks at Sarutobi, meeting the *regretful* gaze of a man she'd respected so much in her dream life, and it's all she can do to keep her disdain from showing on her face.

She doesn't do anything to hide it from her body language, though. She does her best to practically *scream* it.

"I am sorry." Sarutobi says solemnly and her eyes narrow dangerously.

She's certain that he is. He looks grief-stricken, regret oozing out of every pore. She believes him - she just doesn't *care*.

"My forebearers have always supported yours, Hokage-sama." Sakura informs him levelly, meeting his gaze head on. She's thirteen, but only *this time* around, and she has no qualms about staring down a forty year old man. "My father supported your cause even when he disagreed with it. He defended your *mistakes*," She says slowly, and Sarutobi's eyes narrow slightly, "even when he agreed that that's what they were. Uzushio has always been your ally, even when we disapproved." Sakura lifts a hand up and props her chin on her closed, bloody fist. "There is no Uzushio to be your ally now, Hokage-sama. Convince me to continue supporting you with what's left of us in spite

of that.” She challenges icily.

Sarutobi stays dead silent, meeting her gaze with dangerously narrowed eyes. She doesn’t give in. She’s already died once, and it’s remarkably difficult to be afraid of much anything after that.

Finally, after over a *minute* of tense staring, Sarutobi pushes to his feet. Akihito’s breathing stops for a moment, and even her own heart jumps a bit, but she firmly ignores it. He keeps his narrowed stare on her a moment longer and then nods sharply.

“Very well. I will convince you.”

And eventually, he does.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry ;-;

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> "But you must face the ocean once again,
> Follow the tides,
> Wherever you've been."

Sakura's barely thirteen and she's changed the world.

She didn't even realize it at the time - she was just doing what she had to. What she was raised and taught to do.

But now, staring at the group of the one hundred and fifty-seven who decided to stay in Konoha with her, it's blatantly, screamingly obvious.

Mostly because they're standing in the yet-unnamed Clan Compound that *never existed* in the world she dreams of.

The world that she strongly suspects isn't just the elaborate dream it seems like.

She pushes that thought - and all it's implications - aside for the moment, clearing her throat and silencing the small crowd.

It's still eerie how intently all of them listen to her. They trust her, a *thirteen year old girl,* implicitly. Maybe it started out as being out of respect for her father, but they really, genuinely respect *her* now, and it's… odd.

"As irritating as this all is, we need to do this at least somewhat neatly. Akihito and I will be calling from a list of names. When yours is called, come up and we'll give you your new address and your key. There's also the matter I asked you all to think about last week. We've narrowed the list down to four names, and when you come up, please check the name you're most inclined towards. Hopefully by the end of today we'll actually have a name for our 'clan'." Sakura says dryly, and gets a few laughs for her efforts.

It's been two months since Uzushio's destruction, and none of them are anywhere close to healed - but this is a good step. They'll have a safe place to call their own again, instead of the hotel Sarutobi had procured for them, and they'll be able to start rebuilding their

individual lives.

Unfortunately, they came from a wide variety of families. Eighty-three of them either were members of, or had ties to, the Uzumaki clan - including herself. The rest varied widely, and it make establishing an official name for their new ‘clan’ difficult.

She and Akihito sit down to start the grueling process of getting each and every member situated into the compound Sarutobi had set up for them, and at the end of it, they tally up the votes.

Given that they *were* the majority, she’d expected the decision to be ‘Uzumaki’ as their clan name.

Instead, the vast majority had chosen simply ‘Uzu’, in honor of their fallen homeland, and the thought makes her both bitter and almost painfully proud.

She’s thirteen, and she’s given her family a new home, even if it’ll take a long time for them to let it feel like one.

There’s thirteen of her shinobi left, fourteen including herself, and it makes things difficult. They need money, obviously, to rebuild their lives - and they need enough to fund their entire clan, because it’ll be much more difficult for the civilians to start making money than it is for the shinobi to. The issue lies in two things.

Mainly, there’s the problem that she is most definitely not the only one furious with - and possibly irrationally feeling *betrayed* by - Konoha as a whole. They started this war, and it cost Uzushio *everything*, and that makes being in Konoha a bitter pill to swallow.

Worse is that they’d need to team up with Konoha shinobi to round off their uneven teams. They have three full teams of four, or four teams of three. Either way, it leaves spaces behind.

In the end, they decide to rotate. “I’ll go first.” Akihito volunteers. “It’s best to ease our people back into working side by side with Konoha, and I am… controlled, if nothing else.” Akihito says carefully.

It’s enough of an understatement that Ukari, a female chūnin, snorts softly.

“I’ll go after him.” Tsuru, the Uzumaki woman who had used chakra chains, chimes in. “There’s the added bonus of us both being jōnin, so we’ll be facing the more difficult missions. Easiest way to remind them

to respect us as a whole is to help with the dangerous shit." Tsuru offers with a faint shrug.

Sakura bites her lip, hesitating for only a moment before she nods agreeably at that. She doesn't like it. It puts them at risk, obviously, and there are only *fourteen of them left*. But Tsuru's point is undeniably accurate, which means it's the best decision there is. The faster they re-establish respect between their two forces, the less strife there'll be with the less controlled genin and chūnin shinobi, which will make it easier for them to adjust to the idea of them still being allies.

"How good are you with those chakra chains?" Sakura asks Tsuru, who arches an eyebrow.

"Damn good, why?"

"I hear Kumo's got their Nibi wreaking havoc near the Sound/Hot Water/Konoha border lock." Sakura says, a little bit reluctantly. She thinks of a boy with blonde hair and blue eyes, and a man with dark skin and white hair. She thinks *jinchūriki* and wants to take her words back - but she can't.

"You want me to smash kitty cat into the ground? I'm game." Tsuru says eagerly, purple-blue eyes flashing.

Sakura can't help but snort softly at her enthusiasm, ignoring the sickening churning of her stomach. "I'd be most useful on the Kiri border." Akihito adds quietly and Sakura nods, having seen his skill with Suiton for herself.

"Alright. In that case, Tsuru, do you mind going first?"

"If it means I can have the pleasure of completely stomping Kumogakure's precious human weapon?" Tsuru questions with a vicious little grin. "Is that even a *question,* Sakura-sama?"

"Don't call me that." She mutters halfheartedly. No one's come and said it outright, but they've been treating her like…

Like they'd treat her father.

"I'll pass it on to the Hokage." Sakura says, looking away from Tsuru and instead at her desk. She's thirteen - and sometimes seventeen - but they treat her like a *superior,* and that makes her uncomfortable. "The rest of you, write up a summary of your skills, weaknesses, and elemental types if you know them. I'll figure out the teams off that,

get it to me in the next four days or so." Sakura orders, and gets a round of 'yes, Sakura-sama's for that.

They file out and she watches them go with sharp eyes. When they're gone, she turns and strides to the window of her makeshift office and looks out.

Houses made from wood and plaster stand where houses made of stone and tiles should. Trees lurk behind them where rocks and water are supposed to.

Her hands curl into fists at her sides.

She dreams she's seventeen and sometimes the dreams are pleasant, sometimes they're not. Sometimes they're vivid and so lifelike, that she forgets who she even is when she wakes up. Sometimes they're so vague and distant that she forgets she even dreamed at all.

There are some dreams, though, that are always painfully vivid.

Some of them are good. Sometimes she dreams of using the Mystical Palm jutsu for the first time and feeling so happy she feels like she could *fly.* Sometimes she dreams of receiving her hitai-ate, one with a familiar swirl except it twists into a leaf. Sometimes she dreams of training in a four-man team and feeling joy and acceptance, and sometimes one on one with the Hokage herself and feeling *so, so proud.*

Some of them are awful. Sometimes she dreams of a heart in her hand, desperately wanting to cry but unable to because she's too busy breathing for the boy whose chest she's reaching into. Sometimes she dreams of an Uchiha boy who'd rather kill his teammates than speak to them. Sometimes she dreams of an army of eighty-thousand men being reduced to a mere twenty-thousand overnight, and struggling to keep as many alive as she could.

And sometimes, the worst times, she dreams of her own death.

Of giving everything she has to a man who had been an enemy, and then pushing on even after. Of fighting even as her chakra reserves dwindle down to nothing. Of desperately healing the two people she

cared about most, even when she had nothing to heal with. Of struggling on, even as her chakra gates burnt and her body went numb.

And then she wakes up, eyes wide, and stares up at the ceiling over her head. The fan moves steadily, breeze chilling against her sweaty skin, and Sakura just lies there and *breathes.*

Living in Konoha is wrong.

She feels it, deep down into the depths of her *soul* it sometimes seems like.

Not just because it isn't Uzushio. Not just because Konoha is directly responsible for Uzushio's fall.

No, because Konoha *itself* is wrong.

Everything about it just… *screams* at her. Every time she leaves her new house, it feels like she's walking in an eerie, distorted dream. Which is ironic, considering she's fairly sure her dreams are *why* it feels so wrong. It feels like she's been deposited into a fake world and everyone around her is acting like it's real.

This place is wrong. Sakura thinks as she stares up at the ceiling, taking carefully moderated breaths.

Everything about it is wrong, from the houses to the stores to the faces on the monument.

And strongest is the sensation of *wrongness* every time she looks at Sarutobi and seethes with anger. The sense of betrayal reaches far deeper than she thinks it should, roots expanding even into her dreamworld. Sakura Haruno used to look at Sarutobi with awe and even joy, and he looked at her and all her fellow genin with pride.

Sakura Uzumaki looks at him with hatred and he looks at her and all her shinobi with sorrow.

The village is wrong. It's *wrong.* It's houses are wrong, it's streets are wrong, it's forests are wrong. Everything is *wrong,* and it makes her want to tear her hair out in sheer frustration.

"What does it mean," she asks hollowly, "when your own mind tells you you've lost it?"

She thinks of a boy with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a forgotten name. She thinks of a woman with red hair, violet eyes, and a surviving name, sent off to cheerfully kill someone just like the boy.

“It means you haven't lost it yet.” Akihito tells her.

She turns her head sideways to see him perched on her window ledge, feet on the floor and hands braced at his side. He’s watching her calmly, grey eyes almost as pale as her ice blue ones as they assess her. He doesn’t look concerned at all, which has her exhaling a slow, careful breath.

“Then I must be alarmingly close.” Sakura determines, rolling her head to look back up at the ceiling.

“Why now in particular?” He asks quietly and this, Sakura understands now, is why her father had always had the man so close to his side.

She closes her eyes, thinks of a man with spiky hair and a scarred face. *Jōnin Commander,* they’d call him in Konoha. The right hand of the Kage, closest military advisor and highest authority under him.

But Uzushio had been small and she had been strong, and she’d had no need for a Jōnin Commander.

The Village Head had been all she needed.

“Sarutobi gave me a Konoha hitai-ate last night.” Sakura confides. “He didn’t say anything, but the meaning is clear.”

They’re Konoha shinobi now. They should wear her symbol. It’s a fair point, Sakura has to admit that. They fight for Konoha now - they can’t fight for her while wearing another village’s symbol.

Even if it’s a dead village.

Akihito moves, feet shuffling quietly against the floor, and the window gently slides shut. “Fuck Sarutobi.” He says decisively.

Sakura blinks open her eyes, genuinely shocked by the curse.

“Fuck Sarutobi, fuck Konoha, and fuck this village.” Akihito sweeps on firmly and Sakura shifts, propping herself up on her elbows and looking at him incredulously. The lights outside shine through the window, dimly lighting the room - just enough for her to see the hard

set to Akihito's jaw. "We gave everything for that man and his mistake. Nothing he does, no matter how he tries, will ever make us forget that." He steps closer to her bed but pauses a respectable distance away. "We aren't here for Sarutobi or his promises. We aren't here for his regret and his roof over our heads. We're here for *you."* Akihito slides to one knee, bowing his head a bit, and Sakura stares blankly at him.

He lifts his head a moment later, eyes locking on hers with burning ferocity. "If Sarutobi had invited us to Konoha, each and every one of us would have told him what I just said. *Fuck* Sarutobi." He says fiercely. "But Sarutobi didn't invite us. Sarutobi had nothing to do with it. You told us to follow you, and we followed you. You ordered Sarutobi to give us aid, and we received it. You ordered us to work with Konoha, and we are. We aren't here for Sarutobi, Sakura-sama. We're here because you brought us here and you've striven to make a home for us."

"I cannot begin to understand how difficult this has been for you. Your father…" His voice tightens and he swallows once, grief striking them as one. "Your father was my closest friend. We fought, bled, and lived together. But he was your *father*. You, more than anyone, feel the strength of his loss. Far more than anyone else, in fact, because you've so smoothly put yourself in his shoes that they can forget they ever lost him." Akihito says quietly. "I can barely believe it myself, even though I've walked with you day by day, but your skill in the role is clear." He pauses for a brief second and then says, "You are our Village Head now, Sakura-sama, and none of us would consider having it any other way."

Sakura stares and stares, but the grim, severe stare Akihito levels her with is unwavering. Her throat feels tight, her eyes painfully dry, and her breath constricted. "That's treason." She points out through numb lips.

Akihito's jaw tightens, the muscles jumping faintly under the skin. "Fuck. Sarutobi." He says emphatically, expression still firm.

And, well.

How can she argue against that?

She stares for a while longer, her mind spinning, and her eyes slowly narrow as she considers his words.

Eventually, she sits up straight, pushing all the way to her feet. Akihito watches her, still kneeling on her bedroom floor, and she gestures vaguely at him to stand. “What time is it?” She asks distractedly, mind whirring.

“Four in the morning, Sakura-sama.”

“Close enough.” She decides, striding to her closet. “I’m going to speak with the-” Sakura pauses, hand on the shirt she was pulling off the rack, and hesitates. “...With our people.” She says instead of ‘the Clan’.

They might be a clan now, but they were a people first. They were Uzushio’s people before they were a clan of Konoha, and neither she nor the others, were ready to forget that.

“I need to think first, though, on what I’m going to say. Will you help me?” Sakura asks, staring down at the blue kimono-style wrap shirt she holds.

The same blue as the vest Akihito wears.

“Of course, Sakura-sama.”

Sakura rubs the fabric between her fingers, slow and careful, before she nods to herself and closes the closet door behind her.

She pulls the shirt on - and a white kimono-wrap under it - and secures it with a white chestplate that covers from just under her bust to her hips. It fits like a traditional obi might, were it not armored and bowless. She puts on tight fitting black pants as well, mid-calf length, and black shinobi sandals. Then she carefully and methodically pulls her hair into a tight braid, reaching just past her shoulder blades, and eyes herself in the mirror.

It’s been two months since Uzushio fell and she’s spent them working to secure her people a new foothold in the world.

Now it’s time to secure one for herself.

“Akihito?” She asks, opening the door and stepping out of the closet. He’s standing near the window, looking at her expectantly. “Out of our shinobi, we have two seal masters, correct? Tabane and Kahan?” Sakura double checks, frowning softly.

Memories of Akira and Hitomi flicker across her memory.

She ignores them.

“Yes, Sakura-sama.”

“Bring them to me immediately. I need to speak with them.” She commands, and he bows - like he used to bow to her father - before flickering away in a small burst of chakra.

Sakura stares at the spot he’d stood in, closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and then pushes herself forward.

She has work to do, and only so much time to plan it.

Kahan is a distant relative of hers. Fourth cousins, she thinks, as she watches him and Tabane work. Tabane isn’t an Uzumaki, but a member of the Gashin Clan. A clan as notorious for their skill in seals as the Uzumaki were for their longevity.

Sakura lifts her hands up, pointer fingers raised to brush against her bottom lip, and watches intently as they both brush onto seal paper. She can identify most of the properties here and there, but the way they connect and operate together without exploding are lost on her.

It takes hours. Hours and hours of work for them to wrap it up, and Sakura can hardly complain.

The fact that they manage it in twelve hours is stunning in it’s own right.

“We’ll go place them now.” Tabane says as they delicately gather up the seal tags and scrolls.

“Make sure you aren’t watched.”

“Of course.” Tabane agrees quickly, bowing his head to her. “Uzumaki-sama.” He says politely before he turns to leave.

Kahan pauses just long enough to offer her a small smile. “Sorry to miss your speech, Uzumaki-sama. But we’ll take care of this. Just give us the sign when it’s time.”

“I will. Thank you both.” Sakura says sincerely and they nod before

flickering away. Sakura turns to Akihito, nodding to him and flickering away as well.

She reappears in the center of clan compound, Akihito appearing just a step behind her. The compound has been filled with people already, a few more trickling in at the last minute, and Sakura quickly steps up to the small pedestal. She waits there for everyone to settle in before she starts to speak.

“Hello, everyone.” She greets calmly, eyes narrowed as she looks over them all.

They fill up the compound’s open space, but there’s so few of them that it hurts to look at.

She can see some of them wearing the same pain she feels on their faces.

“I gathered you here to speak with you about something I know we all have on our minds.” Sakura begins, pausing for a brief moment before stating, “Kohona is not our home.”

Silence greets her at that - more confused than anything.

“It’s not our home, and for many of us, it’s the last place we’d ever choose to be one.” She says and gets a few grumbles of agreement there. “But it’s where we’ve built our houses. It’s where we’ve placed our families. And it’s where we will now defend with our lives if we have to. I’m telling you this not because I believe you should change your opinions about Konoha. No, I feel the same way.” Sakura says firmly, eyes narrowing. “I’m telling you this because it needs to be said. We are not part of Konoha, and none of us ever will be.”

There’s a few murmurs of agreement but most people are just watching her, so she continues without pause. “We were all there when the first whispers of the Second War started. I, personally, was there when the Sandaime Hokage came to my father and asked for his assistance in a war that he started. My father neither agreed with, nor wanted to defend, Sarutobi-sama’s actions. But Uzushio has ever stood with Konoha, and Konoha tried to help us in her dying moments.” Sakura says grimly, pressing her lips together for a moment.

“I won’t ask any of you to reconsider your anger for Konoha. I, too, feel the bitterness of our losses. I, too, feel betrayed by the village that was supposed to be our sister village - by the village that we are now residing in. I feel it, so I won’t even consider asking you not to.

However," Sakura clears her throat, shifting her weight to one hip. "The fact remains. We live in Konoha now. We are the Uzu Clan now, and that clan belongs to Konoha."

Angry mutters now, some louder than just mutters, and Sakura raises her voice slightly to carry over them. "But that does not mean we do." The crowd pauses, confusion returning, and she frowns grimly at them. "The Uzu Clan belongs to Konoha, but we do not carry the Uzu name. We carry our names, our family names. Our children will carry the Uzu name, but we will make sure they never forsake our roots, and we will never forsake our home or it's people. We will always remember the sound of waves crashing against the rocks, the sight of the sun bleeding across the water, and the taste of salt in the air." Sakura calls to the crowd.

"We will always remember the way that the seagulls flew over our heads. We will always remember the way that seals glittered across the surface of our buildings and roads, lighting up the village at night. And we will always, *always,* remember the way all of that vanished in a single day." Sakura concludes bitterly, throat tightening for a moment, and she ignores the way that some of them stare up at her with faces that have gone pale. "We will never forget that. We will never forget Uzushio, for the good and the bad."

"Never." Someone in the crowd, a man with grey hair, says fiercely.

"Never!" Another man cries, and after a moment, the crowd goes from almost eerily quiet to half-yelling, half-cheering.

After several seconds, Sakura lifts a hand and they slowly quiet down. "Konoha will never have Uzushio. Konoha will never have the loyalty of our people that our homeland had. Konoha doesn't deserve that right." She says quietly. "But. Konoha is where our people are now. We are here, and we are whole for so long as we stay within these walls. This is our home now, even if it will never be more than a home-away-from-home." She pauses for a moment to let that sink in to the subdued crowd. "This compound is our home. But that doesn't mean that Konoha is our home." She adds, brushing her finger against the small square paper in the palm of her hand.

"Today, we are taking the first step towards making this compound *ours.* Not Konoha's, but *ours.* Today, we will make it clear to everyone that while we stand with Konoha, we do it as we are. The people of Uzushiogakure, not the people of Konoha." Sakura lifts her voice as she speaks, sending a small pulse of chakra into the sheaf of paper.

“Today,” She calls over the crowd, “we mark as the first day we once more stood as the people of Uzushiogakure, and *no one else.”*

Chakra crackles and a smooth, pale blue barrier shoots up through the sky. It circles the compound and rises in a curved wall, curling upwards until it seals shut high above their heads.

A dome of chakra, sparkling softly before it fades into the background of the sky and trees.

It takes a moment, and then the crowd starts to cheer, loud and enthusiastic. “Today,” Sakura calls over them as best as she can, and they don’t even try to quiet down so strong is their joy at the reminder of home. “Today, we once more stand on our own. Today, we are Uzushio!”

The crowd roars and the barrier seal locks into place.

It will be many years before anyone outside of the clan steps foot on its land again.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

> "The strange silence,
> Surrounding me,
> Grows closer,
> Feels colder.
> But I'm ready,
> To suffer the sea.
> Black water,
> Take over." - Black Water, OMAM

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura's thirteen and it's been six months since her and her people lost everything.

Four months since the Clan compound had been sealed away, becoming untouchable but not unseen by outside forces.

Tucked in their sanctuary, things are finally, finally beginning to stabilize.

She wears her Uzushio hitai-ate around her forehead like she always has, and a Konoha one around her left thigh - the symbol usually blocked by the katana on her hip.

It's a reluctant compromise on her end of things. "We're in Konoha now," Sakura tells her shinobi when she passes them their new hitai-ates. "We might not fight in their name, but we do fight alongside them."

Like her, none of them had opted to remove their Uzushio hitai-ates, instead wearing both at once. Sarutobi hadn't made a comment on it, but she could see the resignation on his expression when he first spotted the new tradition.

It's been six months since Uzushio was lost, four months since the Clan was established, and three months since she was officially chosen to be the Clan Head.

I'm only thirteen, Sakura thinks as she stares out the northern gate of

Konoha, waiting. But that's not quite true, is it?

She's thirteen - but she's also seventeen, and sometimes that fact is the only thing that helps her survive her new life.

"Uzumaki-sama." Someone says, and she turns to look over her shoulder. Then she blinks, surprised at the sight before her.

For a moment, it's like a glimpse into her dream life. A Nara, a Yamanaka, and an Akimichi stand behind her.

Ino, Shika, Cho, her mind supplies instantly - even though she doesn't recognize them from her dreams. They're all young - though not quite as young as her. Fifteen, she thinks, perhaps.

"Hello." She greets mildly, turning to them fully. She doesn't bow - only offering them the smallest incline of her head, and they bow in return. "You're my team, then?" She questions.

"We are." The Nara answers promptly. "I'll be leading this mission, unless you have any complaints." He says politely and she quirks a brow before smiling.

"No complaint." Memories of Shikamaru flicker across her mind, but she pushes them away. She flashes the man a smile that shows far too many teeth and gestures to the gate behind her. "Shall we go, then?"

Shikaku glances at his two teammates before nodding sharply. "I'll explain the mission on the way."

Sakura's fourteen and it's been over a year since Uzushio's destruction when she finds herself on the frontlines again.

Sarutobi had been hesitant in assigning her to the front again, but eventually relented under the pressure for more medics.

It's not a surprise that she ends up on the Kiri border, given her skill in water jutsu.

In the end, she doesn't do much as a medic. The Seven Swordsmen are

standing strong unlike in her dream world, and they're relentlessly powerful in their assaults on Konoha. Sakura spends more time fighting and killing than any other time on the field.

She's fourteen when her skills and reputation earn her her name.

Dekishi-hime.

The Drowned Princess.

She laughs when they tell her, but it doesn't feel funny at all.

Uzushio had been strong, but she had fallen. The Uzu Clan was strong, and it will *not* fall.

Not as long as Sakura lives.

"Uzushio was strong." Sakura says loudly to carry over the crowd. Her people are silent, watching with tired, grieving eyes as she pulls the sheet away.

A large statue in the shape of a swirl is unveiled to the people. "She may be lost to the seas," Sakura continues as she reaches up, fingers brushing against the rough edges of the swirl. It's shaped to look like the swirl itself is made of water, and all along the edges are names, etched carefully into the stone. Sakura stares at the names for a moment, lingering on Heisui Uzumaki - her mother. She thinks about her parents, and then she thinks about a blonde haired boy who had carried a dead name.

When she speaks, her voice is hard and full of angry grief that burns at her heart and eyes.

"But she will *never* be forgotten."

They layer seals on the marble. Seals to protect the statue, seals to protect the compound, seals to attack invaders. Seals upon seals upon seals.

Some of them are brutal. Some of them are designed to blow the legs right off of someone on command. Some of them are innocent, only designed to give a small burst of comforting warmth to a reaching hand.

Each and every seal glows faintly with the chakra inlaid. One day, when the applier of the seal dies, the glow will fade away. Until then, they remain, offering a gentle blue glow that keeps the stone faintly illuminated at all times.

The compound remains firmly sealed off from the rest of the world.

With the number of barrier seals around it, one could hardly even tell it was there.

Sakura's fifteen and she's killed hundreds - and saved *thousands*. The war reaches it's fourth year.

It shows no sign of slowing down.

Sakura's sixteen, Uzushio's destruction is three years past, and she meets someone she isn't supposed to.

She *knows* she isn't supposed to. The sight of her sends discomfort

rippling down her spine, her hair standing on end as Sakura looks at the twelve year old in front of her.

The girl looks back up at her with blazing defiance.

“This is Kushina Uzumaki,” Sarutobi explains, pulling his pipe away to exhale a small plume of scented smoke. “Your father sent her to us nearly seven years ago, now. She’s the Kyūbi’s jinchūriki.”

Sakura blinks, recoiling a bit. Kushina Uzumaki glares up at her and Sakura fights to keep her expression blank. The girl’s features *scream* wrongness, and the reason hits her like a fist to the head.

She looks just like Naruto. The shape of her face, the expression pulling at her lips and eyes, all of it is… so, *so* similar.

Uzumaki, Sakura thinks, mind whirring. The Kyūbi jinchūriki, just as Naruto had been.

And in her dream life, without herself to lead those that she had to safety, Kushina might well have been the last Uzumaki in Konoha.

‘I just sent a six year old girl to Konoha as a war token, Sakura.’ Her father had said. *‘A six year old girl, condemned to a miserable life as a human weapon.’*

Sakura’s gaze slides past the girl, instead landing on Sarutobi. It’s hard to focus on him as the puzzle flickers around in her mind. She’d known that Minato Namikaze was Naruto’s father - he’d told her that, her dream self, after… Konoha’s fall. But somehow, finding herself face to face with who was undeniably his *mother* is more of a shock. “Yes, I recall him saying something about that.” She says distractedly, eyes darting back to Kushina. “Hello. I’m Sakura Uzumaki, if you didn’t know.”

“I know.” Kushina bites out harshly. More harshly than Sakura thinks she deserves, until Kushina says, “You kill people like me.”

“Oh.” Sakura blinks, part of the puzzle fitting together. Tsuru Uzumaki and her mission to the Kumo frontlines.

The woman had killed the Nibi’s jinchūriki, together with a certain

trio of shinobi of whom Sakura tries not to think about.

The image of a blonde haired woman with a diamond on her brow, smiling down at her, flickers across her mind before she shoves it away.

“The circumstances were unique. Do you have any intention of killing thousands of your own people just to kill hundreds of the enemies?” Sakura asks politely, arching a brow.

The girl’s face goes red with anger. “Of course not! But-”

“Because that’s what he was doing.” Sakura cuts off, meeting the girl’s furious stare. “He was unleashing the Nibi and making no attempt to control it. That miserable excuse for a human killed without any control. He killed just as many of his own people, willingly, as he killed ours. If not more.” Sakura says darkly. “So yes, Tsuru - the woman in question here - killed him.”

A bit too gleefully, to be sure, but the woman had been furious when she explained to Sakura just what the jinchūriki had done.

Sakura pauses for a moment, only speaking up when it looks like Kushina’s about to. “I’m sorry that it had to be done - just as I’m sorry that any lives are taken and lost in this war. But some times it has to, and it had nothing to do with him being a jinchūriki.”

Kushina still stares at her defiantly, but there’s a bit less certainty behind it, so Sakura slides her gaze back to Sarutobi. “Hokage-sama?” She inquires, politely reminding him that he’d actually brought her here for something.

The man puffs his pipe once before speaking. “I called you here because of Kushina’s unique living situation. Her caretaker has passed away,” he says and Sakura sees Kushina flinch a bit at that, “and I wished to know if you’d take her in to your clan-”

“Of course I will!” Sakura snaps instantly, bristling, and both of them blink at her. “She’s an Uzumaki. She’s one of my *cousins.* Is it even a question?” She demands before sharply turning her head to the girl.

Only a few years younger than her in body, but sometimes Sakura feels like she’s the age of both her lifetimes combined.

“One of the Shikoku Clan moved into the home of her soon-to-be husband. It’s a single bedroom. Small, but not cramped. Is that

alright?" Sakura asks, holding the girl's gaze.

The longer she watches, the more uncertainty replaces hostility. "You'll let me stay?" She asks very slowly, and Sakura feels even more aggravated at that.

"Of course we will. Akihito!" Sakura turns her head towards the door as she barks the name, and without hesitation, the jōnin flickers into the room already kneeling at her side. "This is Kushina Uzumaki. Will you show her into the compound? She'll be taking Chizura's home."

"Ah." The man's expression flickers with understanding and he looks at Kushina, offering her a small smile. "You're a student?" He asks and Kushina juts her chin challengingly before nodding. "Alright. Keep up, then." Akihito says with a grin before he flickers away, much, much slower than usual. Kushina vanishes just a step behind him.

Sakura watches them go, following their trail with her gaze for a moment.

Sarutobi sighs heavily and she turns her head just enough to look at him from the corner of her eyes. He looks sad and resigned as he exhales a plume of smoke. "One day, Uzumaki-hime, you'll stop thinking the absolute worst of me."

She offers him a smile that's all teeth. "One day you'll give me a reason to." Sakura retorts, brushing a hand pointedly over her Uzushio hitai-ate and lacing her fingers through her hair. "I wait with baited breath." She says in a tone just mocking enough that only she would be able to get away with it.

Even so, Sarutobi's eyes narrow dangerously - but he doesn't say anything, too guilty by half.

Just as he should be.

Sakura's sixteen when she goes down for the first time in the war.

Kirigakure had obviously done more than just destroy Uzushio - they'd *raided* her, and it takes one of their own seals to take her out. She's in the middle of dodging two separate attacks when a third shinobi slams

a sheaf of paper to her middle back.

She'd be impressed by the honestly impeccable teamwork had it not left her chakra spasming through her system. She drops like a rock, and there's nothing she can do to avoid the blade coming at her.

One of the Seven Swordsmen, yet again showing his ugly face. His sword, thin and coated in lightning, tears through her side like a hot knife through butter.

The only reason it doesn't kill her, she sees through the spray of her own blood, is Akihito smashing his foot into the man's throat.

The smallest of the Swordsmen flies, sword *spiraling* out of Sakura's side and taking her blood and flesh with it, and she drops like a rock.

Hands grab her instantly, dragging her away, but it takes them a precious few seconds too many to grab the tag off her back and tear it away.

By then, her jutsu's long since been shut off by the faltering chakra, and Sakura's eyes roll back from bloodloss before she can reactivate it.

She staggers her way to Naruto and Sasuke, finds them lying in their own blood, and does the only thing she can.

She fixes them.

They wake up briefly, tired and worn, and pass back out before she can finish - and she never does finish, anyways. The blood stops, the wounds close over in bright red, thin, and delicate skin, and then Sakura passes out too.

She lays between them, her head propped on Naruto's bloody shoulder, and she knows she's done everything she can.

She knows she's done her part. She's earned her keep.

She's confident at last that she's a true member of Team Seven now, and she feels content with that when her eyes close.

Her forehead's blank, her chakra reserves are beyond emptied, and she

never opens her eyes again.

Except she does.

She wakes up, opening her eyes to a world of white and emptiness, and an old man waiting for her.

"Sakura Haruno," He begins gravely and she stares at him, eyes wide and chest feeling strangely compressed, "I have a request for you. A task that I believe only you have the ability to perform. I need you to-"

She wakes up coughing weakly and wetly. There's a hand between her shoulder blades, propping her up, and another hand holding her head up. "I need you to wake up," Akihito's voice says urgently,

She does her best to open her eyes, but her lids are like lead and she can't focus on anything. Her eyes roll and shut almost immediately, but not before she spots the two forms hovering over her. Akihito is one, her mind supplies the obvious, but she couldn't focus long enough on the other one to guess. "There she is," Akihito sighs in heavy relief. "Is that enough?"

"It should be." A different, male voice says, and Sakura recognizes it vaguely. A medic, she expects. There's a hand on her jaw, easing her mouth open. "Chew on these, quickly now." The medic instructs. Two small orbs touch her lips. She crunches on them immediately, cringing at the taste.

Chakra pill and blood replenishing pill. Both disgusting and alarming in their own rights. For her to need *both* of them…

She forces her eyes open, trying to focus on what's above her, but there's a hand quickly laying over her eyes. "Nuh-uh. No hurting yourself. Come back later." The man commands.

Cool chakra rushes over her and she feels herself go lax, too tired to move again. Hands are going over her, constantly moving except one which grips her shoulder firmly the entire time. *Akihito,* she thinks with some relief, not so tired that she isn't uncomfortable with the lack of control.

She's not sure how long she lays there, distantly feeling the chakra flowing into her, before she drifts away again.

"Severe chakra damage to the pathways around the fourth Gate, limiting…" Sakura pauses mid-sentence, looks up from the chart at Akihito, and rolls her eyes.

The man's shoulders immediately relax.

"I'll be fine. Permanent damage, certainly, but hardly any." Sakura scoffs, tossing the chart back to her feet where it belongs. She's in a town somewhere between the Kiri border and Konoha, overtaken by the shinobi police (and how strange it is to see the Uchiha symbol everywhere she looks), planted in their hospital.

Their overrun hospital.

"Go spread my tags out." Sakura commands and Akihito's relieved expression instantly goes hard. "Do it." Sakura cuts in warningly, before he can even start. "I need to activate the seal anyways. That's what happens when a *very* delicate seal gets placed in the hands of a moron. Permanent damage in all the wrong ways." Sakura complains, flapping a hand dismissively. "I can take care of most of it. So go spread my tags out and I'll heal everyone here while I'm at it."

Akihito grimaces but nods, stepping back. "Yes, Sakura-hime." He says with a quick bow before he flickers away.

She waits patiently, frowning down at her incessantly tingling legs while feeling her seals pop up all over the hospital. It takes nearly fifteen minutes before Akihito flickers back to her side. "They're placed, Sakura-hime." He says formally and she nods, lifting trembling fingers up to form the seal.

Her body feels far too weak for it - but she opens the Yin seal anyways and begins the process of healing herself and the others.

She never does get feeling in that part of her back again, though.

Sakura's sixteen, the war's gone on for nearly four years, and they have to add their first new name to the Uzu Clan's statue.

"Seka Mizukawa." Sakura murmurs the words, bowing her head.

The kunoichi's father steps forward and touches the seal, eyes shining with tears. He's no shinobi himself, but he doesn't have to be. The seal entwined in the name pulls the man's latent chakra into the engraving, and Seka Mizukawa's name lights up a faint blue.

The sight makes her feel even sicker inside.

"War is a pain in the ass." Sakura shares with Akihito as they sit on the edge of the battlements, taking a short lunch break. "Hell on earth. Or maybe earth *is* hell. That'd be a twist, wouldn't it?" Sakura muses and Akihito offers a soft huff, otherwise silent as he bites into his sandwich. Sakura plucks at a piece of tomato dangling off the edge of her sandwich.

She hates tomato, but she remembers a black haired boy who'd loved it, and she remembers that she's also *starving* and they'd gotten incredibly lucky with the terrible war rationing.

She eats the slice of tomato and pretends to not be disgusted by it.

Somehow, the tomato is worse than the fact that she's pretty sure there's some blood on her fingers under all that dirt…

"I dreamt, you know." Sakura shares absently, frowning thoughtfully at her sandwich.

"You did?" Akihito asks politely, the good right-hand man that he is, even though it sounds like an utterly inane statement.

I always dream, she muses wistfully. "After the seal." Sakura elaborates and immediately gains more of Akihito's attention. "There was a man

in a world of white." *An alien,* she wants to correct, but holds her tongue. "He told me that I had a task to complete." *More or less.*

Akihito frowns softly at her and she shrugs helplessly.

"I didn't say it was anything phenomenal. I just thought it was odd."

I just needed to get it out, she doesn't say, but Akihito nods solemnly like she's just entrusted him to a great secret.

And maybe she even has.

Something about that dream *picks* at her.

There's more to it, she's certain. He'd been about to tell her something important - very important - when she'd woken up.

"Ah, well." Sakura stabs the butt of her sheathed sword into the dirt, rolling it thoughtfully between two flat palms. "A mystery for another day."

A seal flares in the distance, an explosion following shortly after, and Sakura huffs out a breath.

"That looks like Tabane's sealwork." Akihito says quietly and she nods, pushing to her feet at the same time as him.

"Let's go, then." Sakura commands, swallowing down the last bit of her sandwich before they flicker off towards the blast.

The war continues.

Chapter End Notes

> It's hard to forgive the loss of an entire village, but baby steps. The next chapter we'll be seeing a bit of a change in the plot progression, which I'm super excited for. I hope you're loving the story so far! ♥
>
> Also, yes, the implication there was that Mito Uzumaki passed away and Kushina became the new Jinchūriki. =(

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

"Swallowed by a vicious, vengeful sea,
Darker days are raining over me,
In the deepest depths I lost myself,
I see myself through someone else." - Black Water, OMAM

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yet again, Sakura celebrates her birthday on the battlefield, but this time she turns seventeen. She's seventeen twice over, now - but it isn't until March, when she's back in Konoha, that she feels the significance. On March 28th, she goes to sleep and dreams a dream unlike those she'd experienced before.

She of a world made of white, her dream-parents smiling sadly at her from within.

"We're so proud, Sakura. So proud," they tell her, and her heart aches with grief.

They're dead, she knows. They're dead and she's dead and that's the only reason she can see them now. The knowledge hurts.

"We're dead," Her mother confirms, voice going firm as she reaches out to cup her daughter's face. *"But we're not lost."*

"What do you mean?" Her dream self asks without her will.
"Everything's lost. So many people died… too many. Tens of ***thousands.*** *"*

"We know. But…" Her father says, trailing off to glance beside him.

On queue, a man flickers into appearance, kneeling down and holding a staff just like Naruto's. He pushes to his feet, exhaling a heavy and exhausted breath, and Sakura winces a bit at his appearance. He's grey-skinned and alien, with horns and three eyes instead of two. And all three of them stare at her as he takes a step forward.

"I have a request for you, Sakura." He says grimly and her parents fall back a bit, the man approaching until he's just in front of her. She looks up at him, pink hair sticking to skin that's still sweaty from her exertion in life.

“My sons, in every life, have become enemies. And in every life they’ve killed one another, one way or another. Every life except this one. This time, there was a chance we’d never had before.” The man murmurs, holding his staff tightly, and his hand trembles slightly around it.

Somehow, she knows it isn’t shaking with age or tiredness.

No, there’s an alertness to him that makes her uneasy.

“For once, my sons were reborn together. Friends, teammates and rivals, but together. Together, with a bridge between them.” He says quietly. Sakura’s brow furrows at the implication there. “I failed when I focused on the two of them alone. I gave them my power, my endurance, my chakra. I even gave them my lifeforce when their own began to flicker.” She remembers her hand around a stilled heart and flinches a bit at that. “But no mind did I pay to the one who stood between them.”

“Their teammate.” He concludes grimly, gaze uncomfortably intense. “The third. It was the first time they’ve been teammates - and I made the mistake of overlooking the one who had the most potential to bind them together. To not stop them from killing one another, but to stop them from becoming enemies to even begin with.”

She both flinches and bristles at that. “I did everything I could! Everything!” Sakura argues fiercely and the man immediately nods.

“Yes.” He agrees instantly, snatching the wind from her sails, and then quietly says, “But I did not.”

Sakura blinks, startled, and stares at him with deep green eyes.

“I did not do everything I could. I overlooked you, and that was a mistake. You had the potential to bridge the distance between them before it could grow too far. And I ignored it.” He says solemnly, lowering his eerie gaze in shame. Sakura stares at him, utterly confused, until he looks back up and meets her gaze again. “Sakura Haruno,” He begins gravely and she stares at him, eyes wide and chest feeling strangely compressed, “I have a request for you. A request that will give me the chance to not make the same mistake again. Will you listen to it?”

Sakura stares at him for a very, very long time, heart racing and fingers shaking. His words feel enormous even though he speaks so little, and her mouth is dry when she opens it to speak. “I will.”

The man closes his eyes with a strange expression. Relief and sorrow in one.

Then he opens them and meets her gaze fiercely.

“I need you to save them, Sakura.”

“I need you to save them all.”

She wakes up and something *clicks* in her mind. A piece of a puzzle sliding into place, fitting so well it was like it had never been missing.

Akihito finds her late in the morning, lounging on her window seat and looking out at the compound.

Her mind is whirring - going nonstop at full speed ever since she’d woken up.

It’s March 29th.

She would have been eighteen, but instead she’s seventeen for the second time.

And she has no idea what to do.

“Akihito?” She asks quietly, watching the world outside with narrow eyes. Her window is on the side of the house facing the compound, so she can see the people mingling in the streets.

Their numbers are slowly growing, judging by the number of infants and toddlers she can see being carted around.

“Yes, Sakura-sama?” The man questions, and the never-ending politeness of his tone is more gentle than usual.

Her arms are folded across her chest and she grips her elbows lightly. “If you were told you had to save the world, how would you do it?”

He pauses at that. “...Well that would depend on what I’m saving the world from, Sakura-sama.”

“What if it was from me?” She asks, just out of curiosity.

“Then I would poison your tea, Sakura-sama.” He responds so promptly that her lips twitch into the beginnings of a smile - but it dies quickly. “I hope that’s not what I’m being asked to do.”

“It’s not.” Sakura assures him, tilting her head back as she looks out the window. So many people in the Clan compound now... “The newborns,” Sakura starts, “are they carrying the name Uzu?”

“Yes, Sakura-sama. We… are the Uzu clan, now.” Akihito says with some hesitation.

“Yes. We are, aren’t we.” She murmurs, trailing off and thinking about her dreams.

Thinking about her *life.* There’s no denying now that that’s what it was. The final dream had slotted everything into place, and instead of it being like two lenses overlapping, it feels like the two worlds are one in the same.

And for her, maybe they are now.

“Akihito.” She asks quietly.

“Yes, Sakura-sama?”

She stares out at the compound, at the swirling statue in the center of it, and silently watches the people for several seconds longer.

“Go to the Hokage.” She commands, pausing for a long moment. “Tell him he’s invited for tea, if he has the time to spare.”

Akihito is dead silent for several seconds, undeniably shocked.

Four years has the compound been sealed off and locked away from the world, there to see but never to enter. The compound rests on the edge of Konoha, much like the Nara compound did, but very firmly cut off.

Close, but unapproachable.

Kushina herself had been the only new person allowed through the seals in all that time.

“Go now, Akihito.” She orders quietly.

“Yes, Sakura-sama.”

When Akihito returns to tell her that the Hokage will be coming that afternoon, Sakura dresses for him.

She almost never wears anything but her uniform, but it would be discourteous to greet him wearing battle armor when she's been out of the war for nearly two weeks.

Instead of her usual attire, she wears a sleeveless dress. It's low cut just enough to show a hint of her cleavage (which was slightly bigger than her last life) and went down to her ankles. There was a slit in the front from her pelvis all the way down, allowing her movement if she has to fight, and she wears her usual black, mid-calf length pants underneath. She puts on the heeled version of her kunoichi shoes, and wears her silver-clothed Uzushio hitai-ate around her waist in lieu of her Konoha one.

Mostly because she doesn't want to wear both at once.

She goes to greet him at the gates, where he's waiting when she arrives. "I hope you haven't been kept long." Sakura says sincerely and the man hums lightly.

"No, I've only just arrived." He assures her. He offers her his arm and she takes it, guiding him seamlessly through the seals and through the compound's gates.

"I've set them to allow you in. I'll do the same for your ANBU when we both have the time." Sakura tells him and he glances sideways at her, lips twitching downwards slightly.

"Not that I disapprove, but what's changed?"

"I have." Sakura answers truthfully as she guides him into the compound. Immediately there are some looks of surprise or even disapproval - but they both ignore them, heading for her home. "Come, this way." She says, pulling away from his arm when they reach her house. She guides him to the tea room, where Akihito has helpfully set up before apparently taking his leave. They sit across from one another, carefully preparing their tea. "I've held onto this grudge for too long." *Not long enough,* half of her instantly argues. "I've let it fester in my anger."

“A justifiable anger.” Sarutobi acknowledges, to her surprise. She blinks at him and he frowns softly. “I am not blind to my faults, nor my mistakes. This war would have happened with or without us - but my mistakes are why it happened so soon. And they are why Uzushio has suffered so much.”

Her hand shakes slightly as she lifts her cup to sip at the too-hot tea.

“I have done everything in my power to bridge the gap between our villages-”

“And I have not.” Sakura interrupts. “We are Uzushio, Hokage-sama.” She reminds him, setting down to the cup. “With or without the village. We *are* Uzushio. But our children will be part of Konoha, and soon our earliest children will be the age to become students. We need to bridge this gap, as you say, before that time.” She pauses for a moment, then exhales slowly through her nose. “Those of us that lived through it will never forgive Konoha for what happened to us. But that doesn’t mean it needs to be the same for those young enough to forget, or to have never lived through it.

Sarutobi considers her for a moment before sipping at his tea. “What, then, do you suggest, Sakura-hime.”

“Don’t call me that.” She says sharply. Too sharply. She grimaces softly. “You know what they call me.”

“They will call you that forever.” He reminds her none too gently.

“I’m aware. But I’m no princess. I’m the Clan Head.”

“Sakura-sama, then.” He says politely and she nods curtly.

“What I suggest,” Sakura pulls them back to the subject, “is opening our gates. Slightly.” Sakura says, and then looks away so he can’t see the glint in her eyes. “I hear there’s a chūnin that was trained by Jiraiya-sennin.”

Jiraiya, who had vanished in Amegakure only a few months ago. Her knowledge on it is limited, but her memories tell her it’s related to Pain and his comrades.

“I assume you mean Minato Namikaze, given who I’m speaking to.” Sarutobi notes a bit dryly and she nods, looking back at him.

“I’m no seal master, Hokage-sama. But I’ve spoken to one. His name is

Kahan - he's one of our two masters. Tabane, the other, is training Kushina. Kahan's a cousin of mine. He's open to the idea of teaching Namikaze-san the Uzushio way, if he's as gifted as he's said to be."

"He's even better." Sarutobi assures her, a small smile pulling at his lips. "He absorbs knowledge like a sponge absorbs water. If you are willing to teach him, he will learn it with ease."

Sakura smiles softly, sipping at her tea. "Well, then. I dread to hear how much more Kushina will complain about him if he dares to get better at fūinjutsu than her."

Sarutobi looks at her over his tea cup and chuckles.

It's not much, admittedly.

But it's a start, Sakura thinks.

Sakura's seventeen, but sometimes, in eerie moments, she feels thirty-four instead.

Two lifetimes in one body, and the confusion it causes sometimes is beyond unnerving.

"Hello," the familiar man greets her. "We've met before, but I'm Dan Kato. I'll be leading this mission."

Sakura's gaze darts to the necklace half-hidden behind his vest, then meets his warm smile with a strained one. "Sakura Uzumaki. I'll be your medic for this mission."

Dan Kato dies.

But in this life, he doesn't.

In this life, Sakura struggles to keep him alive and fails through conventional means.

For the first time since Uzushio's fall, she activates her Yin seal fully. Instead of just using it to power her seals and the Mystical Palm Jutsu, she uses it's second level - the one Tsunade had taught her, but hadn't yet created in this life.

The Strength of a Hundred flows through them both, his organs mending and his skin sealing, and Sakura sacrifices just a little bit of his life force in the process.

A slightly shortened life is still better than no life at all.

Sakura's eighteen and she's outlived herself.

It's a strange feeling.

"Akihito?" Sakura asks as they are, once more, on the battlefield. This time in the heart of Amegakure - the worst place to be, but the best place to have her, strategically speaking.

Tsunade may have her slugs, and she may still be learning to use the Yin Seal in tandem with them, but Sakura has her seals.

"Yes, Sakura-sama?"

"How long has this war been going on, now?" She questions, a little out of breath and leaning on a tree a bit too heavily.

"Seven years, Sakura-sama."

Seven years.

The Second Shinobi War lasted nine years the first time around.

"Akihito?" She asks over the blood and the smoke and the distant screams of war.

"Yes, Sakura-sama?"

"I really hate this place."

"...So do I, Sakura-sama." He agrees quietly.

It isn't even two years before Kahan comes to her and offers a faint shrug. "I can't really teach Minato more than I already have." He admits to her slight surprise.

She'd known he was a genius, but Uzushio-style sealing was…

Difficult.

To say the least.

"He really is a genius, then." She notes and Kahan nods.

"Yes. But he hasn't overtaken Kushina. I'm not sure he ever will, actually. She's taking to the fūinjutsu like a fish to water - Tabane tells me her father was a seals master as well and had taught her some when she was young."

Before she was offered up as a war token, Sakura thinks, borrowing her father's phrasing. "I see. Well. Have you given her a hitai-ate?"

"I did today. She cried, and then hit me when I mentioned it." Kahan huffs, shaking his head. "An Uzumaki through and through, that one."

"Hey." Sakura protests weakly and gets a roll of the eyes for that. She snorts and pushes away from her desk, scooping up her own Uzushio hitai-ate and tying it around her forehead. "I'm not that bad."

"*You* aren't." Kahan allows, "But that girl has the Uzumaki in extreme."

"Stop saying it like it's a disease. You're Uzumaki too." Sakura reminds him.

"Yes. And I'm surrounded by family members who can't stop shouting at one another over everything. We're a rare, sane pair amidst the utter insane, Uzumaki-sama."

Sakura pauses at that.

"…You may have a point."

"I *know* I have a point." He huffs. "I'm glad I'm not in Tabane's shoes."

Sakura's brows furrow for a second. "I thought you said Kushina was still ahead of Minato-… ah." She blinks in realization. "He's still

training her as an *apprentice?"* She clarifies slowly and he nods.

"She's interested, he's interested, so I suppose we've got ourselves an up and coming seals master."

"Interesting. And Minato isn't following the same?"

"I didn't offer." Kahan corrects and she arches a brow. "Jiraiya's way is too ingrained in the boy. He'll never be an Uzushio seals master, but he'll be an excellent Konoha one."

"Ah. Well. They'll make an incredible pair one day." Sakura muses, mind casting back.

Hopefully, this time they'll live long enough to train Naruto.

Then the boy would really be an unstoppable force.

Her mind drifts to the boy, and it's a long time before she realizes Kahan is still there, watching her with a hint of concern. "You're dismissed." She says quietly and he nods before flickering away.

Sakura turns to the window, looking out at the clan compound, and frowns deeply.

Somehow, she's supposed to save the world - but she has no idea where to even begin.

Luckily, she has approximately twenty-eight years to figure it out.

She just hopes she lives that long.

Chapter End Notes

Not sure the rules on posting links here on AO3, but I hope it's alright. This is what I have Sakura 2.0 looking like in my mind:

http://i.imgur.com/BPKVYMT.png

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura's eighteen and back in Amegakure when she goes down the next time.

She'd heard about the man. She'd heard about how even the Sannin themselves had lost to the man.

She hadn't expected Hanzo to search her out.

Her team goes down in minutes, until it's just her left. Poison from his summoned salamander is what takes most of them, and water jutsus take the rest. Sakura fights as best as she can, but the poison is cloying, and it slowly interrupts her chakra flow more and more until she can't quite keep cycling it out of her body.

Akihito was gone, left to retrieve reinforcements, and she stands alone with little more than her katana to defend her. All the rest of her attention is on keeping the poison from affecting her system too much, but she's slowly getting dizzier and dizzier.

"You're strong, Dekishi-hime." He sneers her disturbing title and she sneers back at him.

"And you're pathetic." She retorts, disgusted. "Your poison kills your own people, yet you use it anyway."

"Anyone foolish enough to get close to me deserves the poison." He says dismissively.

"Come down from your salamander, Hanzo. Let's see who's stronger."

"No, I think not." Hanzo refuses instantly. "I can sense your reinforcements. But know this - If you live through this, I'll have your head eventually, Dekishi-hime. There are those willing to pay quite the sum for it."

He turns at that and Sakura watches him go, salamander slithering away rapidly.

She drops the second he's gone. She sinks to her knees, katana holding

her up and shaking along with her entire body. *Great gods,* Sakura thinks anxiously, squeezing her eyes shut. The poison is lingering and she's struggling harder and harder to keep it out. More and more of it seeps in, making her head spin and her body weak. *I underestimated him,* Sakura admits in the sanctity of her own mind.

Her katana slides in the mud and she falls to her side, the world spinning so viciously it makes her feel ill.

She lingers just long enough to hear shouts before she slips into unconsciousness.

It takes two weeks for her to wake up.

No one else from her team is so lucky.

Chakra related injuries are always the hardest to heal, and it takes over a month for her pathways to regenerate back to their old state after the poison. Akihito spends most of that time hovering, but Sakura spends it plotting.

She does something she should have done years ago.

She writes down her dreams.

Not all of them, of course - but bulletpoints, carefully ordered and marked to show the importance of each matter.

Sakura understands now what she hadn't before. She understands that they weren't just dreams, disconnected and strange. No, it was her *life,* and she can feel it now. The memories are not distant anymore, but right there for her to touch. So she writes them down.

She writes about the year she was born in - another eleven years away - and the years she spends in the academy. She notes the people she meets, their personalities, their connections. She writes about events. About becoming Team Seven, about Naruto and Sasuke and Kakashi.

She writes about everything she can remember, from the date of her birth to the date of her death.

And then she ponders.

The Sage had told her to be a bridge between his two sons - yet Hashirama had been dead for over ten years, and Naruto and Sasuke wouldn't be born for *eleven* years. Nearly twelve.. She's too far away from one, and too far off from the other.

How was she expected to make changes?

How was she supposed to alter them when there's such an age gap to begin with?

Sakura nibbles on the end of her pen and considers her options until there's a knock on the door. She flips the paper over and replaces it with a copy of a mission report that she isn't supposed to have, handed to her by Tsuru of course. "Come in." Sakura calls distractedly, reading the report.

"Sakura-sama." Akihito, of course. She looks up at him and then pauses, blinking once, and then shoots to her feet and reaches for her katana.

"What happened?" She demands sharply, sliding her katana into place at her hip.

"Kushina's been kidnapped. It's already too late," Akihito adds quickly, when she moves to round her desk, and she pauses at that. "A team's been dispatched - but the wards, we don't know how they reached her."

"The wards are still up?" She clarifies and he nods, looking a little bit helpless as he does.

"Tabane is out with the search party and Kahan is examining the seals to make sure they're untouched - but he requested help. You and Tsuru are the only other two shinobi trained in Uzumaki sealing."

Sakura nods at that, tense as she does. "Let's go then." She commands and they flicker away. The sculpture is just outside her own residence, in the center of the compound, and Kahan is there when she reappears in front of the swirling water statue. "Anything?"

To her surprise, the usually jolly male outright sneers at the statue. "Too many things. Someone's been picking away at our defenses, Sakura-sama." He tells her tensely, one hand pressed hard to the statue and his eyes narrowed in concentration. There's a bead of sweat

at the edge of his temple, and she reaches out to set a hand on his back. Her chakra flows easily into his network and his breathing evens out. “Sakura-sama,” He begins grimly and she settles her free hand against the sculpture as well.

There’s hundreds of seals etched into the stone, but all she has to do is follow Kahan's chakra flow to find what’s so distressing.

Her breath escapes her in a soft hiss.

“Someone’s been in the compound.”

Kushina’s found before the night is over.

Tabane and Kahan approach her three days later, sweaty and exhausted, and bare their teeth in a mockery of a smile.

Danzō's announced dead two hours after that.

“There are still questions unanswered.” Sakura notes as she looks out her window, leaning back in her chair and observing the people wander around the sculpture. Even still, so many years later, people leave flowers at the monument. “We know Danzō was the one who was interfering with our seals,” Something that no one outside the four of them know, “but why?” She questions, frowning deeply.

The man had rarely done anything in her memories without an ulterior, and usually sinister, motive. But what could he have against the Uzu clan? A simple distrust over their secrecy? Or was it something worse? Something more? Or perhaps he had Kushina kidnapped himself, doing it to reignite the flame against Kumogakure

as their focus in the war had shifted towards Iwa and Suna for the moment.

She didn't know - and might never know, since she'd ordered the man dead.

She's still not sure how she feels about the fact that they hadn't hesitated to obey, even though it was a massive act of treason to have done so.

Danzō was, after all, a member of Konoha's head council - and Sarutobi's closest advisor.

Yet she'd had his throat slit without a second thought, and her people had followed without question. It felt a little unnerving.

"I don't know, Sakura-sama." Akihito says quietly from behind her, though it hadn't been a true question. "Hokage-sama has shinobi swarming the area, though. There's no chance of us slipping by unnoticed to search Danzō's things."

"I figured." ROOT had yet to be 'shut down', this time around. Sakura taps her fingers against her armrest, frowning out at the compound.

The seals on the statue glow still, not hinting to their tampering, and her eyes narrow a little.

How had anyone gotten close enough to the compound without the seals alerting them? How had they even begun to tamper with them without an alert?

Danzō had knowledge of sealing - she knows that much from her past life - but this took more patience than she remember the man having.

She wonders if he hadn't been working alone.

Sakura exhales slowly through her nose. "You mentioned someone had a request for me?" She prompts Akihito, changing the subject to something less unpleasant, and turns to look at him.

"Yes. Sayuri-san's son is soon to turn five years old, Sakura-sama. She requests your blessing to send him to Konoha's shinobi academy this upcoming year."

Sakura blinks at him.

Sayuri was a civilian, but her husband had been a shinobi.

“I see.” She notes, and the topic isn’t as pleasant as she’d thought it would be.

She looks back out at the compound and nods. “Give her my blessing - and my hellos.” She says dismissively and hears the man bow before he flickers away.

It’s been just over five years since Uzushio fell.

The boy would be the first Uzu-named child to go to the academy.

If all goes well, he might well be the first official Uzu Clan shinobi.

Time goes on and Sakura goes on with it, dragged by the heels of her shoes sometimes. She’s eighteen and close to nineteen when word reaches her ears about a disgraced shinobi.

“Sakumo Hatake,” Akihito explains to her when she makes inquiries, and she frowns deeply at him. “Evidently his mission’s failure led to the loss of our hold on the fort we had on the Shimo-Kumo border.” Shimogakure was the village of the territory between the Land of Hot Water and the Land of Lightning.

“I heard about that.” She says, something twisting at her stomach at this news. “Our forces reformed on the Land of Hot Water border with Shimo.”

“Yes, Sakura-sama.”

“Over fifty people died, correct?”

“Yes, Sakura-sama.”

“Why did he do it?”

“His teammates were captured by Kumogakure, Sakura-sama. He rescued them and lost precious time on his mission’s priority.”

Sakura closes her eyes, reaching up to rub at them.

She remembers hearing about this in her dreams. About her sensei’s losses.

But she *loathed* Kumo, and the idea of him being the cause of them losing precious ground…

"Do you condemn him as well, Akihito?" She asks quietly and he's silent for a long moment.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. If it were you capture, Sakura-sama, I would have cut a bloody swathe into the center of Kumogakure itself if that's what it took to save you, mission or not."

Sakura blinks at the blunt tone of voice, turning her head to look at him in outright surprise.

"On the other hand, if it were some random Konoha shinobi, for example, I would not." The man says quietly. "If the circumstances were in the case they are now."

Sakura pauses to consider that, looking back out the window.

If it had been Naruto or Sasuke, Akihito or her father…

She would have burned the world to reach them.

And… "What you first said. I'd do the same for any of Uzushio's people." Sakura determines even as she speaks, and lifts a hand to run a thumb thoughtfully under her bottom lip. "Sakumo. Did he know his teammates?"

"They're the same as his team from a genin." Akihito explains and Sakura frowns deeply.

"And their reaction?"

"One of them lost a family member at the post. The other is grateful as far as I can tell. You're oddly interested in this, Sakura-sama."

"I'm an odd person." She dismisses instantly. "Thank you for the information, Akihito. Anything else?"

"No, Sakura-sama."

"I'm going out into the village. Don't let my compound fall to pieces while I'm gone." She says lightly, shoving to her feet, and she brushes past Akihito, ignoring his curious expression.

She has some work to do.

She hunts him down and finds him at a dango joint, of all places, lurking behind it and nibbling on his dango while ignoring the world at large.

And hiding from it, hence the lurking bit.

Sakura sidles up beside him, leaning back against the wall with their arms just barely not touching, and presents him with a fresh stick of dango.

He blinks at her.

She ignores him, looking out at the village instead.

It takes him a very long moment to take the stick. “Is this poisoned?” He asks in a very bland tone, which expertly hides his actual feelings.

It’s impressive, actually.

“No. You should eat more, Sakumo-san. You look awfully skinny.” She tells him.

“I’m on a diet.” He says flatly.

She rolls her eyes. “Well, you’re doing an excellent job of it.” Sakura points out, gesturing vaguely to their dango-based surroundings.

His eyebrow twitches a tiny bit. “It’s been one of those weeks.” He says in that same, bland tone.

Boring.

“Everyone fucks up, Sakumo-san.” Sakura tells him smoothly. “Everyone. I would have done the same thing as you even if it meant going into Kumogakure’s heart itself if it were one of my people.” She tells him coldly, looking at him now as she borrows Akihito’s words. He blinks at her, expression flat but not blank - too hard to be emotionless, even if she can’t tell *what* emotion it is. “I don’t care what they say. Maybe it was the wrong decision as a shinobi, but I don’t care. That isn’t what matters.” Sakura says fiercely, matching his intense stare.

“To *hell* with the shinobi rules. If it were one of my people, I’d have done the same thing, no hesitation. I don’t care if it’s what a poor shinobi would do - it’s what a good *person* would do, and that’s what matters.” She shoves off the wall and he watches her, blinking slowly.

When he makes no move to respond at all, she inclines her head politely to him. “Have a good day, Sakumo-san.” She says, and leaves without ever getting a response.

Sakura does everything she can do to change things for the better - but she’s been placed in an awkward time, between two major points, and sometimes she simply can’t do enough.

And sometimes, there’s simply nothing to be done.

She saved Dan’s life and Tsunade remains in Konoha.

Yet Sakumo’s funeral is offensively empty.

Sakura’s nineteenth birthday is spent on the battleground yet again - this time in the midst of a particularly furious fight. Suna’s pulled out of Amegakure for the most part, but Iwagakure is still going strong, throwing all its might at Konoha. Sakura does all she can to stem the flow, using fists and sword against them, but eventually she pulls back and focuses on healing instead.

She spends her birthday sitting on the floor in the middle of an overflowing medical tent, seals spreading out around her as she uses her chakra stored in her Yin seal to heal everyone she’s marked. The shinobi around her do their part by tagging every fallen ally they find, and pulling them back to safety when they can.

She spends her birthday without even realizing it until Akihito taps her on the shoulder, seventeen hours after she sat down.

She peeks open a heavy lidded eye and he offers her a small, grim smile. “Happy birthday, Sakura-sama.” He says mildly.

It's not a joke, but the statement is so out of place, so *wrong* for such a time, that she laughs anyways.

He smiles, eyes wrinkling at the corners, and she smiles back.

She doesn't come off the battlefield for some time. Over half a year she stays there, focusing on keeping as many alive as she can, and only gets pulled back when it's so bad she's had to activate the Strength of a Hundred three times in a single week.

Not because that many people were dying - but because she'd become such a huge target, Iwa was relentlessly attacking her.

The third time, Iwa's so sick of her that their Explosion Corps attacks her from above, not unlike Deidara's tactics.

The only reason she doesn't get blown to pieces is because she'd spotted the shadow when they came up behind them from the sky.

So she's pulled back and Tsunade sent in her place, her fiance Dan loyally at her side, much as Akihito stays by her own.

Which is a slightly unnerving thought, once she actually considers it.

"Akihito?" She questions, and the man looks at her curiously. They're on the road, heading back towards Konoha, but they're deep enough in the Land of Fire's territory that they're more or less relaxed now.

"Yes, Sakura-sama?"

She pauses, considering if she really wants to ask, and then looks over at him. "Why are you so… dedicated to me?" Sakura asks slowly.

He frowns softly at her, and it takes him barely a moment to respond with confidence. "Because your father's dying request was for me to get you to safety."

She frowns herself, blinking at that. "We got to Konoha safely years ago."

"Yes, Sakura-sama." Akihito says, taking a slow but steady breath as he calmly holds her gaze. "But by the time we'd reached Konoha, I

knew that your safety was more important to me than anything we had left. I remain by your side to *keep* you safe now, Sakura-sama. As my own choice."

For a moment she keeps his stare met, but it becomes too heavy for her to hold for too long. She looks ahead instead, brow furrowing slightly.

She's touched, to say the least.

Emotion makes her throat tight when she speaks next. "Thank you, Akihito. You're a loyal friend."

"You're welcome, Sakura-sama." Akihito returns warmly, smiling. "And so are you."

They continue on for Konoha in peaceful silence.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry I didn't save Sakumo. =(

Sometimes things have gotta stay the same. Sakura can't change everything on her own, and Sakumo was hated by a lot of people when he died. What were the chances a single person could change that?

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

> “I won’t just survive,
> Oh, you will see me thrive.
> Can’t write my story,
> I’m beyond the archetype.
> I won’t just conform,
> No matter how you shake my core,
> Cause my roots, they run deep.” - Rise, Katy Perry

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Second Great Shinobi War starts when Sakura is eleven, and ends when she’s nineteen. It lasts just short of nine years, and as insignificant as it sometimes feels, Sakura can’t shake that thought from her head.

Because the first time around, it had lasted just *over* nine years.

Ripples in a pond, Sakura muses as they celebrate the signing of a treaty to bring around the official end of the war.

“You don’t look happy.” Tsuru notes from her side.

Sakura probably couldn’t turn her head to look at her if she’d *wanted* to. She’s not here as just a shinobi, but as the head of the Uzu Clan, and that had meant getting dressed up. The kimono she wears is layered and heavy, silver with white swirls embroidered into the thick fabric, and she’s probably one of the least dressed up of the Clan Heads.

Her people stand behind her, and her shinobi lined up just a step back. Akihito to her right, Tsuru to her left, and the rest branching out at their sides. Kushina’s beside Akihito, sixteen now, and the sight of her wearing a kimono sends a bit of a shock through her - because she’s not a girl anymore. Not a war token - but a beautiful near-adult woman with hair that blazes like fire in the sunlight, unlike Sakura’s, which resembles a dark wine instead.

Kushina looks beautiful, and more importantly, her slightly rounded face looks eerily like one from her dreams and past.

She's distracted from her thoughts when the Hokage signs the treaty and the crowd breaks out into loud, booming applause.

Someone throws confetti.

Sakura presses her painted lips hard together and wonders how long peace is supposed to last this time around.

Someone had added a koi pond to her backyard, and there are four fish swimming in it - one for each shinobi they'd lost in the war. Uzushio's surviving shinobi had dropped from a meager fourteen (including herself) to ten.

To be fair, it was rather impressive they'd made it out with so many left. None of the other clans had faired so well - not even the Uchiha, though they'd only lost a few *percentage* more than her clan had.

Sakura stares down at the fish contemplatively, her hands tucked into her sleeves, and she watches the four creatures swim lazily around. One of the koi was solid silver, one blue and white, one bright gold, and the fourth was brilliant red. An Uzumaki.

She exhales a slow breath, closing her eyes and listening to the water running. It's the middle of the night, the compound silent and unmoving around her.

There's no war anymore. Not even a border skirmish between two overzealous teams in the last month and a half.

She never thought that peace would feel so uncomfortable.

With the end of the war, Jiraiya returns to Konoha, silent about his time away - though he does confess to meeting an Uzumaki to her.

"An orphan boy," He explains, three months after the war is over and a week after his return. He won't tell her much else, even when she offers him a place to stay in their compound. "I'll pass it on," He

offers, “but I doubt he’ll take it. He’s with friends, now.”

She nods and wonders about that, only knowing vague details about Pain and the orphans from Naruto’s encounter with the man.

She wonders if Pain had been Uzumaki. She’d only seen his puppets with orange hair, and that *could* be from him being half-Uzumaki, perhaps? Or perhaps it was the third orphan, the one that had died long before Pain’s attack, that had been the Uzumaki.

Regardless, the man isn’t coughing it up, and the boy isn’t coming to Konoha.

But Jiraiya’s arrival has good timing, and it serves as yet another reminder that things have changed in wild ways for her new life.

Because he come back just one week before Tsunade’s wedding to Dan Kato.

With Tsunade’s status and her own, Sakura’s automatically invited to the wedding, which she goes to with Akihito at her side. Together they quietly observe the proceeding, and Sakura tries to ignore the sensation that twists through her when she watches the woman smile beautifully at her newly proclaimed husband.

It feels an awful lot like loneliness.

Sakura’s twenty, but she sometimes dreams that she’s still seventeen, learning from a woman that doesn’t quite exist anymore, and living in a world that might never exist to begin with.

She’s never sure if it’s good or bad - it just is what it is, and it leaves her unhappy. She looks at Tsunade and her heart twists. She looks at Kushina and feels sick.

Then she looks at a blonde teen and his trio of Genin and feels like something died in her chest.

Blonde hair identical to her dream-best friend, blue eyes the same shade and with the same sparkle, but a harder set to his jaw.

And in his students…

“Congratulations, Minato-san, on your team.” Sakura says on automatic, gaze lingering on one of them. Not the boy with silver hair and two eyes, not the Uchiha with two eyes and clear skin which wouldn't flake away under her palms, but the girl.

The girl with brown hair, purple tattoos on her cheeks, and a kind, shy little smile aimed her way.

“Thank you, Uzumaki-hime.” Minato says politely and as always, the title sends an itching roil down her spine. “This is Obito Uchiha, Kakashi Hatake, and Rin Nohara. Everyone, this is Sakura Uzumaki - the head of the Uzu Clan.” He introduces quickly and Sakura nods slightly at them in hello, while they quickly bow politely to her - even Kakashi.

Rin beams up at her, eyes as wide as her smile. “You’re the best medical ninja in *history.”*

“Supposedly.” Sakura allows, offering a faint smile to touch her face. She doesn’t feel it.

She feels mostly like someone had just punched her in the head.

“Tsunade-hime is better than I, in my opinion.” She hears herself say, but barely notices. She forces her gaze to move from Rin’s faltering smile to Minato’s strained one. “You should visit us some time, Minato-san. Kahan has wondered how you’re doing.” Sakura informs him, and she’s already turned to leave when she thinks to add, “And so has Kushina-chan.”

To her surprise, red splotches across the sixteen-year-old’s cheeks. “Oh, er. Right, I’ll, um. Head over soon?”

“Dinner tomorrow?” She suggests and he nods quickly. She offers him a small smile and an incline of her head. “I’ll let Kahan know.” She starts to leave, pauses again, and looks back at them once more. “I’ll open the seals to your team as well. Six o’clock, Minato-san.” Sakura reminds him gently when all he does is blink at her.

She walks away before they can stare at her any longer, and tries to keep her breathing even.

Everything’s wrong, she can’t help but think, her mind practically screaming at it her.

She walks through the streets, gaze darting from building to building,

and the feeling only grows worse.

Everything.

She doesn't stop until she reaches the compound - her compound - and almost the moment she's in her office, she starts hyperventilating. She throws off the heavy top layer of her kimono, ignoring the way it lands in a small pile of dust, and grabs a piece of paper off her desk.

She quickly scribbles away on it, remembering two different worlds at once, and writes out all the differences she can think of.

There are so many that by the time she's done, she's standing over a desk full of papers and desperately panting for air.

"It's all going away," Sakura realizes aloud, staring down at the papers.

"Everything's changing."

The Hokage finds her the next morning. She's standing by the koi pond, watching it silently, and turns when she smells his pipe. She finds him stepping up beside her, Akihito bowing to her quickly before shutting the back door with him inside the house.

"Hokage-sama." She greets, quiet and tired from her sleepless night.

"You look unwell, Sakura-hime."

She feels unwell. "I'm no hime, Hogake-sama."

"You're the Head of your Clan, Sakura-hime. That makes you a hime." He tells her wisely and in a tone that books no argument.

And maybe he's right. Maybe he's right, and she's the princess of her clan. "Then shouldn't my title be Uzu-hime?" She asks blankly and Sarutobi's hand moves in the corner of her vision, rising to grasp his pipe and pull it away. He breathes out slowly, spiced smoke filling the air.

“No. Because you are an Uzumaki, Sakura-hime.” He pauses for a long time, letting the silence linger, and exhales another mouthful of smoke. “Do you know why I was named the God of Shinobi?” He asks mildly.

She glances at him, surprised by the question, and finds him peering up at the sky from under his hat. “...Your mastery of the five elements.” Sakura tells him and he hums lightly.

“A part of it, yes. But it wasn’t my mastery that I was named for. It’s what I did with it.” He says quietly. He draws from the pipe, fingers lightly tapping the cup of it. “There have been times in this past war that I was on the front lines - but it was only in the First War that I lived on them like you yourself did.” She blinks, turning her full, tired attention to him. “I grew up on the front lines, much as you did. And there was a point in time that I, too, earned a name for myself. And we earned them on the same pendulum, if on the opposite sides.” He exhales a breath and Sakura’s eyes narrow, processing that until he continues, confirming her thoughts.

“I used my skill in jutsu to destroy an entire village overnight. We took the village, we took the fort the enemy had built in it, and before they could even get word of it, we destroyed the next one. And the next. In two nights, I destroyed four villages.” Sarutobi says heavily. “Regardless of who was inside of them.”

Her fingers clench into a fist at her side before she carefully slips her hands inside her sleeves to hide her display.

“Oh, I hate myself for it as well, Sakura-hime.” He sighs softly. “And like you, the name disgusts me just as much as the acts that earned it. I killed over a thousand innocents that day. Likely more. But I also killed countless enemies.” He says on a slightly lighter tone, and she understands where he’s going with this now.

“There’s no upside to my name.” Sakura says sharply and he looks glances at her, eyebrow lifting.

“No? I believe that there is. Dekishi-hime. An interesting name to give to someone such as yourself.”

“A mockery.” She corrects and he hums softly. Her eyes narrow at that.

“It’s a mockery so long as you allow it to be. The Drowned Princess, they call you. But so long as they call you that, they’ll never forget

who drowned to earn you that name."

She pauses, blinks twice, then her brow furrows.

"So long as you carry that title, Sakura-hime, you'll carry your people with you. In the worst light, yes, you're correct to think so. But use it, and it will stop being a title for mockery." Sarutobi says with quiet ferocity.

"It will be a title for vengeance."

Sakura is twenty one years old, sometimes seventeen, and on occasion she's a combination of the two.

She feels the latter when she holds Tsuru's daughter for the first time.

"She's tiny." Sakura murmurs, tapping her finger to the nose of the dozing newborn. Her eyes immediately pop open to frown at the finger, lips parting wide… to yawn, thankfully. Sakura exhales a small breath of relief.

"You would've deserved that." Tsuru tells her warningly. "She screeches like a bat, this one." Tsuru huffs plaintively. "Kahan hates it."

"I didn't even know you were together." Sakura confesses. Tsuru flashes her a grin.

"Good. We're private people, both of us. Which is strange for Uzumaki, I know, but here we are. The three most secretive Uzumaki to live."

Kahan snorts softly from in the corner.

"Shut up." Tsuru, who breaks rules of secrecy *constantly* to tell Sakura things only the Hokage is supposed to know, says sharply. "There are *exceptions."* She complains.

"What's her name?"

"Sakura the Second." Tsuru tells her instantly, at the same time Kahan says,

“Saka.”

Sakura blinks.

Tsuru looks at Kahan and frowns. “I thought we were naming it after her?” She asks in confusion, pointing vaguely at Sakura and the infant.

Kahan sighs loudly. “We *are* naming her after her. Stop calling her ‘it’. Saka is a perfectly good name.”

“Saka means *hill.*”

“Sakura means cherry blossom, what’s your point?” Kahan fires back. “Both are nature based. And they sound similar.”

“But that isn’t how it *works.* You’re supposed to use the entire name-”

“The first half of her name is fine enough, don’t you think?” Kahan complains.

“Her hair isn’t even the right color!” Tsuru protests in a sudden turn.

“You wanted us to name her after Sakura. Make up your mind!”

She’s still twenty-one, almost twenty-two, when tensions start rising again.

“Tanigakure’s signed an alliance with Ishigakure and Amegakure.” Jiraiya tells them all in the first war council in just over two years. All of the Clan Heads are there, along with Sarutobi, his remaining two Council members, Tsunade, and Orochimaru.

Sakura looks over at the faces around her - some of which are starting to become recognizable now. The Nara Clan’s Head has been replaced since the end of the war, and Shikaku Nara’s expression is grim as he listens. Fugaku Uchiha sits as his clan’s Head, while the Hyuuga’s Clan Head - Hiatari - is joined by his son, Hiashi, who hovers at the elderly man’s back.

“But against who?” The Yamanaka’s Clan Head - Inori - asks grimly.

“I don’t know.” Jiraiya admits. Orochimaru makes a soft noise that

they all ignore. “But,” He adds, folding his arms across his chest and looks darkly at them all, “Takigakure’s been speaking with Kusagakure as well. And from the north, I have heard word of Yugakure approaching Shimogakure, but that’s so far just hearsay.” He pauses, grimacing. “So far.”

Sakura closes her eyes for a moment, then opens them and frowns at the group. “Then we should assume the worst.”

“And what is that exactly, Uzumaki-hime?” Sarutobi prods politely and she leans forward a bit, bracing an arm on the half-moon table in front of her. Sarutobi and his two council members are against the far wall, facing the half-moon, with Jiraiya standing in the center and Tsunade and Orochimaru off to the side, standing together against the wall.

“The absolute worst? We never touched Tanigakure. Never once. Suna’s conflict was only ever with Iwagakure, until we all clashed in Amegakure. But they’re joining an alliance that includes Amegakure and Kusagakure, which we warred with heavily. That implies they intend to help them. Takigakure, the same. We never touched them.” Sakura reminds them all, getting a roomful of acknowledgements for that. “Amegakure and Kusagakure are no doubt bitter for what was done to them in the war.”

“And frankly, they deserve to be.”

“It was war.” Hotaru, one of Sarutobi’s councilmen, says sharply.

“I’m not arguing that. But I’m stating facts. They’re out for blood, blood that’s justifiable, which means more people will be on their side when the time comes.” Skirmishes had already started around the borders, though Sakura wasn’t supposed to know that. Tsuru hadn’t even been the one to tell her, but Uma, one of her jōnin, who had been part of one of the skirmishes. “We’re looking at an alliance of five minor countries - one which holds the two largest of them. An alliance that has their own jinchūriki.” She can’t help but point out with a grimace.

“An alliance that we’ve thoroughly pissed off. The only good bit of news is that we aren’t the only ones that did.” Sakura adds with a huff. “But the Great Countries, all of us, have been hit hard.”

“She’s not wrong.” Shikaku cuts in, looking at a few of the faces beside her who she couldn’t see. And who had apparently looked disagreeable, she assumes. “It doesn’t look good. We lost far too many

people in this war, and we were hit by the worst of it. Which means we'll be the first target."

And the Land of Fire was nestled nice and pretty between every Major and Minor country there was.

"Uzumaki-hime's wrong on one point, though." Shikaku adds and she blinks, arching a surprised eyebrow at him. "That isn't our only good news. The good news is that none of the Major countries can take advantage of this without getting past the Minor ones. There's also the good news that Amegakure joined this alliance of theirs - it means they need time to rebuild, first. Amegakure's all but gone, but so long as they have Hanzo, the other Minor countries need it. They need *him*. He and the jinchūriki from Taki will be the primary two able to stand against our strongest forces."

Here, he nods at Jiraiya and his teammates, who straighten a bit. "And," Shikaku adds with a small, bitter smile, "We also have the best spymaster in the countries." Jiraiya blinks, but Shikaku sweeps on severely before anyone else can say anything. "Which means we have more time to prepare than anyone else."

One thing that's clear to her in that moment is that there's something that will never change.

Shikaku's *destined* to be Jōnin Commander.

Silence fills the room for a long minute before Hiatari clears his throat. "As you all know, my son will soon be replacing me as Clan Head - which means I'll be able to dedicate my time to personally training my Clan." He says hoarsely, age showing through, and a few of them nod at that.

"My wife and I will begin the same immediately. Our eyes are yours, Hokage-sama." Fugaku chimes in, and Sakura clears her throat so she can speak next.

"And my seals as well, Hokage-sama. Inori-sama, I understand your Clan mans the seal that monitors Konohagakure's walls?" She asks politely and he looks over at her, squinting a bit before nodding. "I know the level of secrecy you hold over this role and I wouldn't presume to ask were the situation not so, but if you would be willing, I would be honored to take a look at the emergency seals."

The man raises a brow, his gaze unreadable, but nods. "I would be honored as well, to have an Uzumaki's touch on the matter. Hokage-

sama?" He questions and the man gestures quickly.

"Be my guest - but be ready to be sworn to secrecy, Uzumaki-hime."

"Not me - but Tabane, one of my seals masters. He knows both Uzumaki-style sealing and outside, so he'll be the best option for working with foreign seals." Sakura corrects quickly, then glances around to double check they're still in agreement before she nods sharply. "I'll inform him immediately. And I'll have my people work on mass producing stasis seals, Hokage-same, for food and supplies."

Mass produced or not, they won't last them long once the war breaks out, but anything is better than nothing.

Still, Sarutobi looks mildly relieved as he nods his head at that. "Do so immediately, Uzumaki-hime."

Tabane eagerly sets to work and Sakura contemplates life and all it's many mysteries.

The Third War was an extension of the Second War. The losses in the Second War directly led to the Third War, the Minor countries rising up against the Great countries who had dealt such immense collateral damage to them.

The fact that they'd had a year of actual *peace* had surprised her, because the border skirmishes never really ended in the world of her dreams. But they'd had *two* years, not just one, and *that* was strange.

Because she can't say *why* they had the unexpected peace.

She can only guess, and her guess isn't a pleasant one.

"Danzō." Sakura determines when she pores over her notes. It's the only difference she can find that could *possibly* be linked to the two. "Danzō and ROOT."

Removing the rotten core of Konoha had, somehow, led to the Second War ending earlier, and the Third War's unofficial start to come later.

The realization is unnerving.

“How much strife was that man the true cause of…?”

Chapter End Notes

Peace is so fleeting in the Naruto Universe =(

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

> “If the sky that we look upon
> Should tumble and fall
> Or the mountain should crumble to the sea,
> I won’t cry, I won’t cry,
> No, I won’t shed a tear,
> Just as long as you stand, stand by me.” - Stand By Me, Florence + The Machine Cover

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Third War, in the end, kicks off with a bang shortly after Sakura’s twenty-second birthday.

An actual, literal bang.

Iwagakure’s Explosive Corps invade the Land of Fire, cutting through Kusagakure and blasting through the small line of defense they’d laid there.

Iwagakure kills five hundred people and make it a third of the way to Konoha before the three Sannin reach them - and subsequently slaughters them.

The one survivor that they take doesn’t last long under Inori’s hands.

The attack sets off the beginning of the War. Iwagakure had taken advantage of the attention on the Minor countries, but the Minor countries weren’t about to be forgotten. At the heels of Iwa’s attacks came Takigakure’s, and from there, the battles began spiderwebbing out.

Takigakure was, by far, the most annoying of their opponents - but their jinchūriki, at least, barely seemed able to control himself.

Tsuru is sent to the front lines immediately, her chakra chains doing wonders for suppressing the jinchūriki, as well as for snatching him out of air when necessary. They hadn't yet been able to kill him, but the last time he was on the field, Tsuru held him down and Akihito nearly gutted him before Taki shinobi nailed Tsuru with a particularly brutal jutsu to her face.

Luckily, Sakura had been there as well and healed her quickly so she could return to the fight. Otherwise she might not have made it, which would have been an unflattering end to her jinchūriki-harassing career.

And so the Third Shinobi War officially begins - with Iwagakure's over aggression and Takigakure's jinchūriki being swatted out of the sky like a gnat.

It's not all that different from the Second one.

"It says a lot about me as a person, I think, that I'm more comfortable on the battlefields than at home."

Tsuru barks out a laugh at that, but Akihito glances over at her with a more serious expression. "You've spent nearly half your life on the battlefield, Sakura-sama. Of course you would be."

"Some of us are just made for the battlefield." Tsuru interrupts, reaching up to rub at her shoulder. "And there's no shame in that, Sakura-sama. It doesn't mean you love bloodshed - it means you love the struggle." Tsuru lectures and she grimaces at that idea. "It means you love being able to fight. Or being able to save. Healing comes as naturally to you as breathing, Sakura-sama." Tsuru explains and Akihito's harsh frown eases slightly. "Just like fighting comes as naturally to me. Doesn't mean I like killing. But the movement, the *power* of fighting - that, I enjoy in the moment."

Sakura grimaces, looking down at the sword draped across her thighs, blood stained and half-cleaned. She hesitates for a long minute, then returns to cleaning it in long, careful strokes.

Eventually, Akihito speaks up. "It doesn't make you a bad person, Sakura-sama. If anything, it makes you a good one." He says quietly.

“As Tsuru said. You’re at your best when you’re healing and defending. Who could possibly complain?”

She nods absently at that, remembering a time when she’d been strictly a healer and barely a fighter.

How frustrated she’d been when she couldn’t protect her precious people.

…Well.

Sakura rises to her feet, brushing off the last of the blood and sheathing her sword. “I’m going to the medical tents. Hold down the fort.” She commands, striding away even as they offer quick ‘yes, Sakura-sama’s.

She might’ve failed in that life, but she hasn’t in this one.

Not yet.

The war continues and somehow she finds herself back in Amegakure, this time facing the full brunt of their shinobi. And this time with a very unique group of people.

“We’re the only four people to stand against Hanzō and come out on top.” Jiraiya explains and Orochimaru snorts shortly.

“To come out *alive* and barely in tact. I seem to recall having to carry you out?” He corrects snobbishly and Tsunade’s head snaps around to glare at them.

There’s a band of gold on her finger, and it’s all Sakura can look at for a long, long minute.

She doesn’t miss the way that Jiraiya’s gaze keeps catching on it, too, and he doesn’t miss the way hers does. “You’re here to tag us and protect the front lines.” Tsunade informs her sharply, shaking her from her uneasy emotion, and she looks up to see Jiraiya staring at her.

And the other two, too.

“Of course.” She says, forcing her attention to return to the *important* matter. “I’ll need your non-dominant hands.” Sakura gestures and Tsunade and Jiraiya immediately present their lefts - while Orochimaru squints at her before slowly extending his right. She taps her fingers to their wrists and with a small spark of chakra, her seal settles against their skin. “I’ll be able to heal you through this, as you know - and in times of emergency, as in you’re fatally wounded or close to it, flare your chakra into it. I’ll be able to fix it, but it’ll hurt you in the long run, so don’t do it carelessly.” Sakura explains grimly and gets attentive nods for that.

Tsunade pulls her wrist back, gold glinting as she rolls her sleeve back down, and Sakura swallows hard before looking elsewhere.

She can’t help but notice how Jiraiya does the same thing, and the sensation worsens in her gut.

She should be happy for her would-be-sensei. She should be thrilled that the woman had gotten the love of her life, had been spared something horrible that had haunted her her entire other life.

But all she feels is an overwhelming sense of *wrongness.*

Sakura’s skilled and even stronger in this life than in her life, but even she has a weakness - one that she carried with her through time.

Poison.

There’s only so much she can do to protect herself from poison, so when the Legendary Trio return victorious, she’s relieved by the sight of Hanzō’s blood on their hands.

She’s wrong to think he’s the only one she had to worry about.

The attack comes out of nowhere, when she’s ventured onto the front lines with only Akihito to defend her back. She’s healing and fighting, keeping a constant channel of the Mystical Palm Jutsu through her seals, when Akihito cries out an alarm.

She turns just in time for a senbon to go into her shoulder, three more hitting Akihito in the chest. Her breath catches and she rips the

senbon away, moving to grab Akihito by the shoulders, when she catches sight of the glistening fluid on the senbon.

Shit. Sakura thinks before a wave of dizziness hits her. Akihito drops to the mud and she goes with him, reaching out with shaky fingers to pull the senbon out of him, but she can't heal him. She can't heal anyone.

The poison shakes her chakra system, making it shudder in time with her, and she winces at the nausea that rushes through her. The Mystical Palm Jutsu falters, her Yin Seal shriveling back up into a solid diamond on her forehead.

Shit, shit, shit. Not good.

There are shinobi around her, shouting and yelling, but it's a Tanigakure woman who pounces on them.

Sakura doesn't remember much after the blade slits Akihito's throat.

All she remembers is red.

Her hands shake as she holds them together, fingers twined so tightly they feel cold and numb.

The funeral is small and quiet. Kushina and Kahan stand behind her, the only other two Uzu shinobi not out at war. The Hokage is there as well, though she doesn't notice him until after the time for words is over. He walks past her, setting a hand on her shoulder and squeezing it gently.

He's even dressed in black for the event.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Sakura-hime." He says softly. She doesn't respond, gaze locked on the coffin in front of her.

She absently pats Kushina on the head when the teenager hugs her, murmurs something to Kahan she doesn't even hear, and after long enough, they leave her in peace.

She stands in the cemetery and watches blankly as his coffin is lowered into the ground and meticulously buried.

Eventually she makes her way home, barely remembering to stop at the store on her way home.

Her hands shake when she steps into her backyard, and her fingers tremble when she unties the bag.

A small, solid black koi, the same color of Akihito's hair, swims out into the water, wriggling its way into the growing pack of fish.

Sakura lowers herself to the ground and folds her shaking hands loosely in her lap.

When she finally begins to cry, there's no one there to hear it.

Barely a week goes by before she's forced to admit that without Akihito, she's terrible at being Clan Head.

The man had kept everything meticulously organized for her, handled all of the smaller problems without her ever even knowing about it, and had made sure only the important issues crossed her desk.

Now, she has to handle it all on her own. Everything from a broken faucet to a report from the front lines from one of her shinobi. It all comes to her attention, in an unrelenting force.

Sakura does her best, but she can barely focus at the best of times, much less at the worst.

It's hard, nearly impossible, until Kushina corners her.

"That's it." The eighteen, almost nineteen year old girl snaps, slamming her hands down on her desk. Sakura blinks at her, taking in the furious blaze to the woman's blue eyes, and is yet again struck by the similarities. With her jaw set like this, she looks so much like Naruto it feels like an insult to injury. "I've had enough," The teen rallies on, ignoring Sakura's blatant confusion. "You're struggling. I get it, I do. But I'm sick of it. Give me this." Kushina reaches forward and rips the paper straight out of Sakura's hand.

She watches it go with a weird sensation.

Kushina flips it around, takes one quick scan, and scowls. It's a request

for a plumber. “I’m taking this. And this.” Kushina adds, yanking up another sheet from her desk. “*And*- You know what?” Kushina glares at Sakura’s desk, exhaling a harsh breath through her nose. “Get out.”

“I’m sorry?” Sakura questions faintly, beyond lost.

“Get. Out. Go get lunch, go feed the fish, I don’t care - just get out of this office. I’m sorting your desk, and you’re in my way.” Kushina commands.

She rounds the desk and Sakura has to evacuate her chair before Kushina’s hip smacks it and sends it rolling away. The girl doesn’t even seem to notice. She just leans over the desk and begins to furiously organize it, muttering under her breath here and there.

Sakura watches for several long, strange minutes, before she awkwardly turns and leaves, feeling like someone had just hit her in the head.

She wonders if this is how people felt when Naruto got that short with them.

When Sakura returns, Kushina has moved half the papers from her desk to the small tea table on the other side of the room. She faces Sakura down with a set jaw and a stormy stare, but there’s a hint of uncertainty she can just barely make out. “Hokage-sama doesn’t like having me on the front lines.” Kushina tells her abruptly.

Sakura frowns softly at that, brow furrowing.

“He doesn’t want to lose the Kyūbi. Nevermind that I can somewhat control the damn thing. No, it’s more important to keep me *protected.* ” Kushina huffs, folding her arms across her chest and looking at Sakura challengingly. “Well I won’t stand around all day doing nothing. If I can’t help my people in the war, I can at least help them here. You need an assistant. I’m it.”

And without waiting for a response, the girl sits down at the tea table and stubbornly begins to scribble away at the papers.

Sakura watches her blankly, thinking about an academy student who

had treated tests much the same way. With stubborn ferocity, like he could force it to give him good grades if he just wrote the answers hard enough.

She's not sure if it's a good idea.

But it can't get much worse.

Losing Akihito is like losing her own shadow.

The man had loyally been by her side at every step, every turn. Even the Hokage hadn't separated them, putting them on the same missions and deployments - and when they did rarely separate on the battlefield, it was never for long.

He was always by her side. Always watching her back.

Now, Kushina does that.

It doesn't feel the same.

But it keeps her going.

She's been back in Konoha for nearly two months when she goes to the next war council. In the midst of war, the Clan Heads were rarely part of the war council - usually they only participated in major missions, or preparations before war. Or the clean up after one.

So for a war council to be called when it is means a major mission.

"The fight on the Iwagakure border is taking a vicious toll." Sarutobi says grimly. "We need to change the tide, and soon."

Something tickles in her mind.

“This war is rapidly turning into a war of attrition, and Iwagakure has more supply lines and strike points than we have. They have the advantage, we cannot pretend otherwise. So how can we work around it?”

It takes her a long time to put it together, and by the time she lifts her hand for attention, the discussion has been going on for nearly fifteen minutes.

“Uzumaki-hime?” He questions severely and she looks at him, a strange sensation twisting her stomach.

“I have an idea, Hokage-sama.” She says quietly, the room falling silent at his gesture. Sakura meets his gaze, mind whirring even as she speaks.

“We destroy Kannabi Bridge.”

Chapter End Notes

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From now on, things are starting to pick up.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

> “You can lift your head up to the sky,
> Take a deep breath and give it time,
> You can walk the path along the lines,
> With your shattered frame of mind.” - Frame of Mind, Tristam & Braken

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura runs a cloth down the length of her sword, carefully cleaning it of any residue. Her forehead tingles with the power of the Yin Seal, the storage painfully empty, but the seal is directly connected to her other seals.

Even if there’s no chakra stored inside, she still needs it active to channel her healing.

There hasn’t been chakra stored inside it in over two weeks now, since three days after she was sent to the Iwa border.

There’s a war to fight, and a plan to lay the footing for. Fugaku Uchiha, of all people, carefully watches her back now - a looming presence invading the space Akihito used to fill as naturally as if he were part of her.

But Akihito’s gone, his life snuffed out as easily as her chakra had been, and Fugaku is what she has to deal with for now.

The man does his job well, she reflects as he moves suddenly. She jolts to her feet, alerted by his motion, and her sword snaps up just in time to swipe a kunai out of the air.

“I don’t know why I even bother.” Sakura scoffs, tossing away the blood-soaked rag and re-entering the fray.

There’s a back against hers that doesn’t belong and a hole in her heart, but the war goes on, and shinobi go on with it.

“It’s going to be difficult to lay the groundwork.” Shikaku noted when the war council had pored over maps and shinobi assignments just over a month ago.

“We’ll have to go slow to keep suspicion off. Carefully shift our forces from the Kusa border and down lower.” Inori had agreed with a grimace of distaste they all felt.

Going back into Amegakure’s territory was the last thing any of them wanted to do. War time or not, it was impossible to erase the memory of what they’d done to that place.

“I’ll head south, to the Kusha outpost.” Sakura volunteers, reaching out to tap the map. Just between the Kusa and Ame border.

It was about to become the epicenter of the biggest shitshow this war had had yet.

“I approve.” Sarutobi says immediately and Shikaku nods, brow furrowed slightly in intense thought. Even Sarutobi was now silently waiting on the man.

Sakura wonders how that would make the man feel. If she remembers right, he’s only three years younger than her. Not that old at all.

But Shikaku shows not an ounce of wavering when he speaks. “Fugaku-sama. Would you go with her?”

Sakura blinks.

Fugaku arches a brow but instantly nods. “Of course, but why?”

“She needs someone to protect her now and you’re one of our best close-ranged fighters.” Shikaku explains. Hiatari, the Hyūga’s elderly head, instantly looks offended.

“I approve.” Sarutobi repeats, instantaneous and firm, and Hiatari closes his mouth without a sound.

Then he twists it into the meanest scowl Sakura has ever seen. It would be impressive if not so unnerving.

“Sensei?” Jiraiya cuts in, glancing beside him at Tsunade and Orochimaru (whose presence Sakura is still getting used to), and speaks further when Sarutobi turns to him. “We’d like to go to the

same area. Perhaps the Shirō outpost." He points just a few outposts south of hers, nearing the middle of the border with Amegakure.

Sarutobi eyes the spot on the map for a long moment before he nods. "Very well. I approve."

"Good." Shikaku says, half to himself. "I can work with that. Tsunade-sama, I hear you've learned a technique similar to the one Sakura-sama uses?" He asks as politely as he can.

Tsunade and Sakura both make odd, unpleasant faces at that. Tsunade for the implication that she's a copycat, and Sakura for… the realization that Tsunade is now a copycat in this world.

A copycat of a copycat of herself.

The universe was a strange place.

"If you have, that's wonderful." Sakura chimes in quickly, if a bit distractedly as she eyes the map. "Together we'll be able to cover a fourth of our military on that border."

"Yes," Tsunade says a bit tightly. "I can use my summons to heal at a distance, now that I have this." She points a thumb at her forehead, which carries a purple diamond identical to Sakura's own.

Sakura flashes her a small smile, trying not to show how uncomfortable she is speaking to the woman, and quickly looks back down at the map. "Getting them to look away from Kannabi long enough to slip a team through is going to be difficult."

"Extremely." Shikaku concurs, frowning intensely. "This idea has merit, however. If we shift our shinobi, they'll have to shift theirs, too. If we do it slowly enough, we'll have an opening - but it'll be small. We need to figure out who's going to attack the bridge."

"I volunteer." Sakura says instantly, faint memories flickering through her mind - about Kakashi, Obito, and the girl Rin who she'd only met the once.

"I need you on the border." Shikaku refutes and Sakura shakes her head.

"You need me there to start. But you need someone keeping an eye on the operation from a distance." Sakura clears her throat, making sure she has Shikaku's full attention before she continues. "That team will

be on their own out there, without any back up - but we can't afford this mission to fail. So I'll stay on our side of the border and help them from afar if they run into trouble - and if they run into too much for me to heal, I'll create a diversion and retreat. Perhaps back to the Kusha outpost." She suggests.

Shikaku's uncomfortably intense stare holds hers for a long minute before he looks back down at the map. After another moment, he looks up at the Hokage. "It has merit." Is all he offers.

But that's all it takes.

"...Very well." The Hokage repeats. "I approve."

Sakura brushes the blood off her sword again and frowns down at the bodies. Iwagakure, all of them.

"Well." She starts, stops for a moment, and then looks at Fugaku and exhales a breath. "At least we know it's working."

A month into their careful retreat to the Ame border, leaving a token force to hold ground at the Kusa border. A month into their plan.

There's two more months to go, and then Sakura has her own plan to follow.

She smiles and Fugaku nods his head at her, unknowing of the plot forming in her mind.

She's just glad he won't be joining her on her endeavor.

A month goes by, and then a second, and then Sakura and Fugaku return to Konoha for the next war council.

"The team has been chosen." Sarutobi, with Minato Namikaze at his side, announces.

Minato's been busy raising hell on the Taki border, drawing more of Iwa away from Kusa, and has been making a name for himself. "My student, Kakashi Hatake, has just passed his Jōnin Exam with flying colors." he explains with the confidence of a practiced public speaker.

Sakura's slightly impressed, but she can't help but remember him as a scrawny teenager getting training from Kahan.

"He'll be leading the attack in three days. The team leaves at dusk."

Sakura arches a brow, glancing at Sarutobi. *Under the cover of darkness, hm?*

"Yes, Sakura-hime, you will be joining them - and then retreating to the Kusha outpost for the rest of your three-month assignment."

"Yes, Hokage-sama." Sakura agrees with a nod.

She doesn't share that there's a good chance of her simply never coming back.

"I should be going with you." Kushina mutters furiously as she paces. Sakura carefully packs her bag, nodding at the appropriate places and frowning at the others.

"Someone needs to lead the Clan."

"Yeah, sounds like a job for the Clan Head."

"The Clan Head is a very busy woman, with many responsibilities." Sakura says airily.

"You're joking! You never joke. Are you sick? You must be sick, you can't go on the mission." Kushina says in a rush, moving as if to touch Sakura's forehead, but Sakura shoots her a *look* and the woman stops abruptly.

"I'm not sick. And I joke." She says defensively.

Very grim jokes, on the rare occasion, but she *jokes.*

Though not so much since Akihito passed.

But she feels lighter than usual as she packs her bag. She feels…

Strangely upbeat. Like there's a light on the horizon suddenly shining down on her.

Which is likely not good for her state of mind, as she's heading towards what might well be her death, and most of her plan is to play it by ear.

Kushina's muttering brings her back to the present.

"I need you here, Kushina." Sakura says heavily. "Holding down the fort. Keeping the Clan together."

"You never had Akihito do that." Kushina points out mildly enough that it only stings a little.

"Akihito delegated." Sakura fires back dryly.

Kushina's nostrils flare. "It's not my fault! They never do it right! I have to do it or it ends up a *mess!"* She says almost shrilly.

"I believe you." She actually doesn't. "But there you have it, Kushina. So I need you here, to make sure things go right and don't end up a mess."

"Are you mocking me?" She demands.

"*No,* Kushina." Sakura sighs loudly. "I'm pointing out that *I need you here.* I have other people to watch over me out there, Kushina, but no one else to watch over my people. *Our* people."

Kushina grimaces at that, glancing away and crossing her arms - but after a moment she looks back, deflating right before Sakura's eyes. "Fine. Fine, I'll stay here - *again.*" She huffs. "But I'm going to find someone to do my job so I can go next time, just wait." She turns around to march out.

"Don't pick on anyone again, Kushina!" Sakura calls after her, the door slamming moments later. "I don't want a repeat of last time!" She shouts louder.

The front door slams, too.

Sakura's still feeling oddly upbeat when she meets the team at the gates.

Kakashi, staring flatly and judgmentally up at her, Rin looking at her with almost adorable shyness, and Obito glancing between her and Rin with a frown. Minato towers above them all, smiling faintly at her. "Everyone, I'm sure you remember - this is Uzumaki-sama. Uzumaki-sama, this is Kakashi, Rin, and Obito." Minato re-introduces quickly.

Sakura bows faintly at the four - the most her 'stature' will permit her. "A pleasure. If you could all please hold out your non-dominant hands for me?" She asks politely.

After a couple confused blinks, they do so, and Sakura goes about quickly applying her seal to their wrists. Obito's, in particular. His left arm sticks out to her, and relief tickles at her mind. *It was his right one to get ruined,* she remembers. *The seal won't be broken in the rockfall.*

"This will let me heal you from a distance." Sakura explains and Rin immediately looks at the seal with new interest. "So long as you don't break the seal, it'll work. I'll remove it once the mission is over."

Kakashi and Rin silently nod, but Obito looks at his seal and mutters, "*Cool,"* under his breath.

Her lips twitch slightly before she straightens and looks at Minato. "Shall we?"

He offers a faint half-smile, more bitter than pleased, and inclines his head.

"Let's move while the night's still dark." Minato says firmly. "We've got three days to get to Kannabi. Let's make it count."

"You disapprove." Minato determines hours later, the two of them lingering at the back of the group while Kakashi leads it with stern ferocity.

"I do." She confirms without needing to ask. The children are young -

thirteen for Rin and Obito, but a mere nine for Kakashi.

“You suggested a new team to fill the role.”

“It’s the smart decision.” Sakura agrees flatly, folding her arms across her chest. Her arms are bare, the dark green dress she wears sleeveless, and there’s a slit down the front and back of it to allow movement. Under that she wears a mesh shirt, carefully tucked away, and black pants. Her silver Uzushio hitai-ate is framed on her forehead, and her black Konoha one is around her hips. “We can’t spare the exceptionals.” She reminds him. “All of them are spread out on the front lines to divert attention. All but you, me, and Hokage-sama.”

“Wrong.” Minato corrects quietly and she blinks, tilting her head to the side a bit so she can look at him. His brow is furrowed slightly, lips pressed hard together with something akin to concern. “Almost all of our… exceptional shinobi, as you say, are on the Kuso, Ame, and Taki border. The rest are fighting Kumo. But Kiri’s stirring things up to the east.”

“Damn.” Sakura murmurs softly. “A mess, then.”

“Yeah.” Minato concurs. “Hokage-sama went to the Kiri front lines himself, along with Ino-Shika-Chō’s current line.”

“Ah.” They’d been due for the Taki border, but Kiri was just as well. “Well. We’d better hurry this up, then, so our esteemed leader can get back to work without all our best holed up here.”

“They’ll just be holed up somewhere else, anyways.” Minato sighs heavily. “This war…” He trails off, looking out to the side, and his eyes narrow darkly.

“Welcome to war, Minato. It’s miserable. Be glad that even two of your students were spared their childhoods.” Sakura says mildly, reaching up to adjust the shoulder of her dress. “They went into this war as Chūnin. That alone gives them an advantage over other shinobi."

“I know that.” Minato sighs heavily. “I haven’t forgotten the Second War.”

“You weren’t there for the start of it.” Sakura points out grimly. “If you had, you might understand that your team is, unfortunately, *lucky* to be getting into the deep of it now. In the Second War, they

would've been thrown into the tides at the first sign of combat."

"Sounds pleasant." Minato mutters.

"Konoha's a strangely gentle place sometimes." Sakura muses, frowning. "Konoha always tries to spare her younger shinobi, even when it's unfeasible."

"Uzushio didn't do that?" He asks, glancing at her curiously and she offers a faint shrug.

"Uzushio was small. She needed every shinobi to stay strong. And it worked, for a very long time." Sakura murmurs. "I was on the battleground the first day Kumo marched on Konoha, and I was on the battleground until the day Iwagakure signed the treaty." She narrows her eyes a bit at that. "Though you can see how much good that does us." She says darkly as they steadily approach Kusa.

Minato's silent for a long minute before he looks at her with hard eyes and a set jaw. "One day, treaties will mean more than the paper they're written on." He says quietly but firmly. "One day, we'll have actual, genuine peace."

She blinks, taking in his fierce expression and feeling her heart clench painfully.

He looks so much like Naruto that it hurts.

She swallows thickly. "Yeah." She agrees, looking ahead, and then she wonders.

Maybe changing the world won't be as difficult as she thought.

Maybe all they need is for Minato to live past his twenty-fourth birthday.

Maybe all she needs to do is make sure that happens.

But *how?*

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Kannabi Bridge.

An update on the timeline, since things are probably a bit muddled up now.
Sakura's 23 at this point, Minato and Kushina are 19.
Ino-Shika-Chō are all 20.
Obito and Rin are 13, and Kakashi's 9.
The Third War has been going on for a year now.
The Kyūbi Incident is five years away.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

> “And is it worth the wait,
> All this killing time?
> Are you strong enough to stand,
> Protecting both your heart and mine?
> Who is the betrayer?
> Who’s the killer in the crowd?
> The one who creeps in corridors,
> And doesn’t make a sound.” - Heavy In Your Arms, Florence + The Machine

There are lines all around her.

Every line is an event, and there are *thousands,* with one single line at the epicenter of it all.

Kannabi Bridge.

Sakura’s perched in a tree, carefully camouflaged and just barely inside the range of her seals. She can still feel three seals pulsating in the distance dead ahead of her, and one is so far she can barely feel it.

Minato, gone to reinforce the front lines to the north-east of them.

Sakura leans back against the tree trunk, arms folded across her chest, and she’s the perfect picture of comfortably at peace.

But she isn’t remotely close to peaceful. Her mind is spinning viciously, overwhelming and anxious at the flow of her thoughts.

So many lines. So many events, all surrounding this event now. If she changes this one event, the entire web falls apart - and she lived an entire life on that web.

Everything stands here and now.

And she has no idea what to do.

Sakura closes her eyes, taking slow, carefully regulated breaths. If she weren’t, she’d be hyperventilating.

Before, it had been easy to get lost in the new world. Everything had

been unrecognizable and strange - but this was *too* recognizable, and it's suddenly striking her how woefully unprepared she is to face it.

What do I do? Sakura wonders, opening her eyes and looking out at the forest anxiously. There's nothing around her, of course. She's miles inside Konoha's territory, and extremely well hidden besides. Even if Iwa was to venture far enough in to see her, the chances of spotting her were very, very low.

So long as she doesn't move.

What do I do? Sakura's mind returns to the main problem and her breath catches slightly. She's running out of time to make a decision, and there's too many options and consequences laid out before her.

She needs to save Obito. But save him when? Save him *how?* If she doesn't save him now, how will she find him again? If she *does* save him now, how will she find Madara and Black Zetsu? If she saves him now, who will take his place as Madara's slave? Who will take Rin's place as a sacrifice for Madara's cause? If she saves him now…

But what if she doesn't.

What if she doesn't save him now, but instead later?

"I've never been able to walk the straight path… but this time, I think I'm doing the right thing." Obito had told her when she held Naruto's heart in her fist, keeping it beating after what the man had done to him.

He'd saved him.

He'd given his life in save them all, in the end.

And Sakura's sitting there debating whether or not to save him in return.

She narrows her eyes, lip pulling back in a disdainful sneer at her own self.

How could I even be struggling about this?

She can practically *hear* Naruto's disappointed lecture.

I can't let him down, Sakura thinks wryly. *Not in this life, or my last.*

With that thought, she shoves to her feet, shaking off the jutsu that had camouflaged her against the tree bark, and jumps.

She hits the ground carefully, landing on the balls of her feet, and springs back up and *runs*.

The flaring of one of her seals tells her she won't quite make it in time.

By the time Sakura flings herself full-speed into the valley, two teammates are in a hole in the ground, and Kakashi's crouched over a dead body and looking inside the hole.

The rock-jutsu hill they're occupying is surrounded by Iwa shinobi.

Sakura asks no questions and doesn't so much as slow down.

Instead she charges straight for the first shinobi she sees and smashes his face in so hard there's little left of his skull when he drops. With her other hand she swings her sword, cutting into the next person, and then swings it up to swipe a kunai away from her face. "Get out of here, Kakashi!" Sakura shouts before she leaps up and kicks another shinobi in the throat.

With the strength Tsunade had taught her, even out of practice with it as she is, the man's dead before he hits the ground, and the blood spray is frankly fantastic.

She twists between two more shinobi, springing out of the way of an earth jutsu, and stuffs the two shinobi right in it's way instead.

The spear of earth goes through the head of one and the chest of the other.

Sakura spins away from another kunai, sheathing her sword as she does, and then goes for pure taijutsu.

She sees Kakashi on the other side of the field, pulling Rin away by her wrist, and the girl's mouth is open to shout something, but Sakura can't hear it over the fighting. She ignores it, focusing instead of keeping the shinobi thoroughly distracted.

It takes ten minutes for her to kill them all. By the time she's done, she has more injuries than there are bodies around her, but few of them pose any danger. One man had gotten in a good slash to her

side, dangerously close to her lung, but that was the only one that she was really concerned about.

Sakura scans the area, bent over a bit and catching her breath, before she starts to limp her way over the jutsu-created cave in the unnaturally raised earth. She would heal herself, but she's not sure how much chakra she's going to need for-...

Sakura blinks, peering into the cave, and then blinks again.

"...Obito?" She questions.

There's no response. There's no Obito.

There's a number of giant boulders, an alarming amount of blood on the ground under one in particular, but there's no body there to provide the blood.

"Obito?" Sakura asks again, utterly confused.

How could he have possibly…

….*No, that's not possible.* Sakura's brow furrows and she jumps down into the small space, tucking a hand under the boulder as far as possible. It's wet with fresh, cooled blood. With a burst of chakra, she swings her arm up and sends the boulder flying out the hole and landing with a crash in the distance.

She thinks she hears a tree fall over, too.

There's more blood under the boulder. A *lot* more.

Arterial, she thinks immediately, narrowing her eyes at the blood spray arching out from under where the boulder had directly touched the ground. The curve had allowed blood to spread further out after a certain point, and she follows it to another boulder.

This one, she punches so hard it turns to dust.

One horrible coughing fit and a bit of regret later, the air clears enough for Sakura to find the answer to one of her questions.

Where Obito had gone, though not *how.*

There's a tunnel before her now, previously hidden by the boulder - and Obito had somehow passed between two massive rocks and landed himself in the tunnel. *What the hell?* Sakura wonders, gaze

darting warily into the dark tunnel. There's very little lighting at all, and only part of Obito is even visible to her eyes with the lighting so poor. She creeps towards him, one hand going to her katana, but when she reaches him, nothing has jumped out to attack her.

What the fuck is this? Sakura wonders, looking between Obito - who shouldn't have been able to be where he is now - and the tunnel - which is clearly jutsu-carved and eerily pitch black.

She hesitates for a long, long minute before she slowly crouches down at Obito's side and sets a hand to his left shoulder.

Her other hand rises from the hilt of her sword, making a sign in front of her face. *Yin Seal: Release. Strength of a Hundred.*

Thick black lines shoot across her body, down her arms and hands and into Obito's own skin. The lines cover them both, head to toe, and Sakura grimaces at the immediate chakra drain.

She lowers her free hand back down, this time to examine Obito's wounds, and her grimace darkens.

Even the *Strength of a Hundred* might not be enough to save his arm. It's been mashed into something more akin to jelly than flesh and bone - and the *Strength of a Hundred,* while the most powerful healing jutsu out there, couldn't regenerate bone.

His arm might as well be severed, for the state that it's in.

Oh, Obito, Sakura sighs softly, looking down at the boy.

In the faint light of her chakra, he looks so innocent compared to the Obito she remembers in her nightmares.

Kakashi's prepared to stare down death when the red-haired woman had sprung unexpectedly into the fray. Drawn by the seal on Obito's arm, he has to guess, but he doesn't have long to think about that.

The woman takes out two shinobi in the blink of his eyes *(Obito's eye)* and turns to him with an expression so fierce he flinches a bit at the sight of it. "Get out of here, Kakashi!" She shouts, snapping him out of his frozen state.

He twists around, leaning down to shove a hand into the hole of the cave. “Rin! Take my hand!” He says urgently, the girl looking up at him with a conflicted, tearful expression.

“Go.” Obito whispers, and the weakness of his voice only makes Kakashi’s eye throb fiercer.

He sounds like he’s already drifting away from them.

“Rin!” Kakashi urges when the girl still doesn’t move. He hears screams behind him, flesh against flesh and jutsu’s being shouted in desperate tones. The distraction is working, but it might not for long. “Hurry!” He pleads, and finally, Rin shakes her head. Tears fling from her face, but then she looks up at him with determination and takes his hand.

“Goodbye, Obito.” Rin says shakily.

“Bye… Rin… Kakashi.” Obito whispers back, faintly enough that Kakashi almost doesn’t understand the words.

He pulls Rin up out of the hole. There’re two shinobi pierced by a rock jutsu of their own, bodies propped up hideously not far from them. Rin makes a noise at the mangled corpses but Kakashi ignores them, dragging her with him and rushing away from the battle. The Uzu Clan Head has the Iwa shinobi focused on their side of the battlefield, freeing the path to…

To Kannabi Bridge, Kakashi realizes after a moment.

Not to Konoha, to safety, but to the heart of their mission.

The message is clear to him, leaving him feeling a bit shaky inside.

They’ve got a mission to complete, even without Obito there. Even without Minato-sensei, or the Uzumaki woman. Rin’s breath hitches on a quiet sob as they run and the sound makes his heart clench even worse. His eye throbs. A few tears escape it, making the raw skin burn furiously, and they roll down his cheek against his will.

He blinks hard.

He takes a deep breath, squeezes Rin’s hand, and heads for Kannabi.

They have a mission to do, with or without the rest of their team.

The tunnel is unnatural.

She knows it is. It *screams* it at her every sense, making her skin crawl and her mind race and her breath hitch every time she lets herself think about it.

She tries to ignore it the best she can, focusing on trying to repair Obito's arm as best as possible. It's a lost cause, though, she's beginning to suspect - and the longer she tries, the more evident the tunnel's *strangeness* becomes to her.

She feels like she's being watched.

It's not until she cancels the Strength of a Hundred that she realizes she actually *is.*

She gives up on the arm and she cancels the seal, ready to amputate instead, but she doesn't see the ill-lit shadow rising from behind her. She doesn't hear the creature peeling slowly out from the wall.

She doesn't realize the truth of it until a blow to the back of the head sends stars bursting in her vision.

She falters for a moment, falling forward and catching herself on one hand - but a second blow has her crumpling into the bloodied dirt.

White hovers over her, distorted by her unfocused vision, but even without a clear look, understanding dawns.

White Zetsu.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

> “I’m headed straight for the castle,
> They’ve got the kingdom locked up,
> And there’s an old man sitting on the throne that’s saying
> I should probably keep my pretty mouth shut.” - Castle, Halsey

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura wakes up with a kunai already pressed to her throat. “Don’t move.” A calm, level voice commands her.

She doesn’t move.

“Open your eyes, slowly.” The man continues, and she opens them - *slowly* - to find it isn’t a man at all.

White Zetsu, her mind hisses, her fingers instinctively twitching at her sides. She blinks up at the ‘man’ with narrowed eyes and he looks back down at her. It’s the true ‘Zetsu’ and his black half is missing.

His eyes, green and unnatural, peer down coldly at her. “You have a job to do. Look to your left.” He commands icily.

She glares at him for a moment before she turns her head slowly to the left, the kunai scraping softly against her skin. Obito lies on a rock slab a few feet away, blood dripping down from the stone, and there’s another Zetsu hovering over him with what looks more like a butcher knife than a scalpel. He’s hacking away at Obito’s arm-

Sakura swallows back bile, too used to gruesome sights to let this one affect her. “A job?” She asks in a mild tone as she looks into the darkness that surrounds them.

A cave, she’s certain, and there’s… *something* inside it. She can feel it even if she can’t see it, and she thinks it’s behind her.

“Yes. Your job is to save that one’s life.” The Zetsu pauses for a moment, kunai pressing down just enough to draw blood, and she winces at the sting of razor-sharp metal. He pulls it away and she turns her head to glare at him, anger intensifying at the vicious smile

he wears. “Good luck.” He says lightly.

Sakura slowly sits up, rising fully when no one reacts, and turns back to Obito.

There’s blood everywhere. The Zetsu hovering over him - looking ropey and his face swirled in a way that reminds her of ‘Tobi’s mask - is holding the knife in an almost confused way.

Sakura steps forward without allowing a hint of her anxiety to show.

She isn’t about to give these child butcherers the pleasure of seeing her squirm.

“Get out of my way.” She tells the Zetsu, lifting a hand to draw on a chakra scalpel. The Zetsu jerks away quickly, half-dancing as he goes, and she takes his place at Obito’s side.

It’s a wreck, but not a terrible one. The... removal would have worked, Sakura can tell - but if Obito would have lived *long enough* was another question. She sets to work carefully undoing the unnecessary damage and cutting away what needed to be removed, all the while keeping her ears open and her eyes carefully wandering.

The cave is nearly - *nearly* pitch black. But the longer she watches, the more she can see, and there’s a faint outline of something *huge* some ways away from her.

And between it and her, a human figure that looks small and frail compared to the massive object.

Madara, her memories supply. Obito, the Zetsus, the cave… It all connects to Madara, so it must be him.

Damn, Sakura thinks, closing her eyes for a brief moment.

How the hell am I going to get out of this?

Her work goes completely uninterrupted. The cave is eerily, and if she allows herself to admit it, *terrifyingly* silent aside from the hum of her

chakra, the dripping of blood, and the occasional *squelch.*

It's not until she's putting the finishing touches on the amputation that the Zetsu approaches again. "His leg?" He asks, and Sakura looks down to the limb in question. The boy's hip had been mangled in the rockfall, and so too had the top, outer half of his thigh.

"Salvageable. It's the rest of him I'm worried about." Sakura responds curtly. "His ribs are practically dust. The only reason he's still *alive* right now is because I healed his lung and I'm manually encouraging it to breathe. He has no ribs. The second he wakes up and so much as breathes too deeply, there's nothing I can do for him."

"Then remove them."

Sakura stares blankly at Zetsu.

"Remove the ribs. Remove the flesh. We'll replace it."

"Replace it." Sakura repeats flatly.

"Keep him alive." Zetsu commands sharply in response, turning and walking towards the massive silhouette on the other side of the cave. Sakura watches him go with narrowed eyes, one hand on Obito's chest and the other on his shoulder. One to keep him breathing, the other to keep him from bleeding out.

She doesn't remove *anything* until Zetsu returns, chunks of a white, fleshy substance in his hands. She stares at it, brow furrowed and mind working through memories of dreams and a life past lived. Obito's chest had been cut in half, one half flesh and the other half made of Hashirama's DNA. Was this…?

"Remove it." Zetsu repeats.

She stares at him for a long time before she swallows thickly and begins to cut.

Sakura's twenty-three. She's been through two wars and going through a third. She's seen life be created and she's seen death come in the blink of an eye.

She's been born twice, and she's died once.

And once you've died, there's very little have left to be afraid for.

Unfortunately, Madara's plot had stumbled on one thing she *is* still afraid for.

Obito's self and sanity.

The process to remove and replace a quarter of the boy's body is grueling and horrifying. The way the fleshy substance moves and transforms under Zetsu's hand, consuming the boy's organs and cradling them like muscle and skin would…

Watching it is the most disturbing thing she's ever seen.

And she's seen a lot.

"Behave and we won't kill you." Zetsu warns her when he attaches a shackle to her wrist. It's massive and designed to more than just capture shinobi - but to also cripple them in the process. It siphons away her chakra, using it to reinforce the chains, and there's little she can do to fight it. She suspects she could rip her hand free if she was desperate enough, but she'd be dead before she could escape in her state.

She's died once before - the thought of dying again doesn't frighten her at all.

But the thought of the world repeating itself does, and she has to stay alive if she wants to help keep Obito sane. She needs to stay alive for that.

So she lets the creature shackle her.

She lets him order her to check on Obito, examining him with the small amount of chakra she's allowed to keep, and that's enough to keep her busy.

But then one day becomes two, and two days become four, and four days become a week.

A week, and already Sakura can feel it picking away at her. It's not just the boredom - or rather, the absolute lack of ability to do *anything* but occasionally look over Obito.

It's the darkness and the silence that are getting to her. The longer it

goes on, the harder it becomes for her to tell reality from an overactive imagination. Things move in the corners of her eyes and she can't tell if they're Zetsu's or nothing at all. Faint murmuring that she can't tell where it comes from, and she can never make the words out.

It's rapidly becoming a living hell.

It takes another week for Obito to be healthy enough for her to let him wake up. The fake, fleshy substance made of Hashirama's DNA has latched onto his skin, and under Sakura's guiding hand, it's taken proper root.

Obito wouldn't have to deal with it potentially falling off him, but he'd still have to be careful not to move so much the flesh changed shape on him.

It takes two weeks in total for her to release Obito from his chakra-induced coma.

But finally, he wakes up.

"I don't know how that rockfall didn't crush you. It's almost as if you were able to slip away from it…" Madara says hoarsely to the confused boy.

"Where was I?" He asks weakly and Madara hums softly.

"You were lying in my underground passage… next to the rockfall. But half of your body was crushed, indeed, though my servants treated you… with some assistance." Madara's gaze flickers briefly to hers and she shudders at the red gleam she can see even in the darkness. Obito must not notice the glance because he doesn't turn to look as well.

Good. He'd pull some serious stitches if he tried that.

"So you saved me? ...Thank you." Obito says with painful sincerity.

"It's too early to thank me. You'll have to repay me this debt. You said your motto was to help the elderly, did you not?"

“Well… Yes, that’s true. But… what do you need?” Obito asks in confusion. Sakura grimaces, lips twisting against the hand over her mouth. Zetsu’s hand, holding her tightly against the distant wall. Madara’s silent for long enough that Obito starts up again. “I can’t stay here too long. I need to go back to Konoha! There’s a war going on, and I just awoke my Sharingan! I can finally protect my friends!” Obito says, so earnestly it hurts.

He has no idea the monster he’s talking to, and this just drives the point of Obito’s current innocence into Sakura’s heart like a knife.

“Protect your friends…? With that body, you can’t go back to being a shinobi.” Madara says quietly and condemningly. Sakura twitches slightly. The hand around her face pulls her head back so hard her neck pops.

“What?” Obito questions, voice rising. “No, no, no! I just finally got my hands on the Sharingan! Now I’m confident that we can work together as a team! I can finally be a shinobi who can protect his-”

“Face your reality.” Madara cuts him off harshly. “This world is full of things that don’t go as you wish. The longer you live, the more you realize that reality is just made up of pain, suffering, and emptiness.” Silence lingers after that proclamation, broken when Madara continues on. “In this world, wherever there is light where are also shadows. As long as there are ‘winners’ in this world, there are ‘losers’ as well. And from the desire to protect love, hatred is born.”

He pauses for a long minute, while Sakura takes slow and careful breaths through her painfully upturned head. “There are people who were saved because you were lost. Am I wrong?” Madara asks coldly.

“What the- That doesn’t mean I need to stay here forever!” Obito snarls furiously.

“If you want to leave,” Madara says icily, “then do it. If you can move, of course.”

There’s no smugness in his tone, but there’s plenty in his words, and for once…

Sakura gets to feel a bit of smugness.

Because she’s the *best damned healer* in the world now, and Madara had underestimated her. Obito could move if he chose to.

Perhaps not *well,* but well enough that if she can make an opening for them to escape…

But, no. She can't. Not yet. The timing is beyond poor, but that doesn't mean she has to wait long…

"Old man," Obito says suddenly, cutting through the tense silence that had fallen in the cave. "Are you a missing-nin? Who are you?"

She hears footsteps quietly creeping away from Obito and rustling. Someone sitting down, she thinks. "I'm… a ghost of the Uchiha." Madara says gruffly. "I am Madara Uchiha."

Silence settles again at that proclamation. The hand on her head eases a little, her neck craning a bit less tautly. Pain zings up and she *knows* the asshole Zetsu had done some damage.

Asshole.

"By Madara, you mean my ancestor? That's impossible! He should be long dead by now!" Obito argues.

"Perhaps. I escaped death… but if I don't keep constantly absorbing chakra from the Mazō, I'll die immediately."

Mazō? Sakura recoils slightly at that. *The Gedō Mazō?* She wonders, a shiver running down her spine. Just thinking about being anywhere *near* the shell of the Jūbi makes her feel ill.

"I'm going home!" Obito cries out, a hint of childish desperation entering his voice. She hears him move, standing up - and then she hears him fall. "Ugh! My leg…" Sakura closes her eyes at the tone of his voice.

The kid is only thirteen, and she can only imagine the horror he's about to experience. To find out you'd had a quarter of your body replaced by essentially alien matter while you were unconscious…

It was unthinkable.

Unimaginable, even.

"Give up. There are no exits here." Madara tells him coldly.

Not yet, Sakura corrects. *There will be once I see an opportunity.*

And she can't *wait* to break a hole in this hell-cave.

“Neither you or I are able to leave this place with our current bodies. If you move too much, the artificial flesh I stuck to your body will be ripped off. Do you want to die?” Madara questions.

Obito stands up. She can just barely see him moving, taking a heavily limping step towards her. She doubts he sees her - it had taken nearly a day for her eyesight to adjust enough to the darkness to see three feet away from her own face.

“There are quite a few things I want you to do for me from now on. After all, I saved your life. Don’t be so eager to throw it away.”

“What do you want!?” Obito half-screams. “What does an old bastard like you want with a kid?!”

“I want to change the fate of this world. A world of winners. Of peace, of love. And I’ll make a world of just that.”

“I don’t care!” Obito snarls back at Madara. Sakura closes her eyes, tempted to roll them at Madara’s words.

All Madara wanted was a lie. A ridiculous lie.

“I just want to go back to my team!”

“As I told you, things don’t go as you wish.” Madara informs the boy flatly. “One day you’ll realize that too.” Obito limps ever closer, slowly and weakly but with the kind of determination that reminds her of a blonde haired boy when he was the same age. “If you really want to die, I won’t stop you.” He says mildly. “But I’ll take your Sharingan.”

Obito hesitates.

“Why… Why do you want my eye? You already have a Sharingan!” Obito fires back fiercely, but his voice wavers.

“I left my real eyes to someone else. This one… is just a spare. And I’m missing a right eye. You need both to awaken their full potential.” Madara explains calmly.

Heartless, Sakura thinks darkly. *Genuinely heartless.*

Obito hesitates, takes one more step, and then pauses.

He stares right at her, a little more than fifteen feet away, and blinks.

“…Uzumaki-sama?” He croaks out in a heartbroken, confused tone of voice, before his leg gives out and he falls.

With the Zetsu holding her tightly, all she can do is watch silently.

Hang in there, Obito, Sakura thinks as a second Zetsu grabs Obito and helps him back to his feet.

The boy stares at her, lost and dazed, before he gives in to the Zetsu’s prodding and slowly limps back to his bed.

Chapter End Notes

Soon™

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

> “It’s the nature of the experiment,
> It’s the patterns of my temperament,
> It’s the nature of the experiment,
> They’re taking me in increments.” - Nature of the Experiment, Tokyo Police Club

Obito’s first glimpse of the Uzu Clan Head isn’t a good one. Her dark red hair is matted even in its braid, and her cheeks are starting to hollow out. Her dark green dress is filthy and wrinkled, her hands shaky, and there’s a manacle tightly wrapped around one, thinning wrist. It glows faintly with chakra, and the sight of it sends his stomach sinking. A chakra chain.

With that around her wrist, she won’t be able to help him escape - and the fact that they were even able to *capture* her…

No, his first glimpse of her isn’t a good one.

His second glimpse is markedly better.

It’s the next day, right after he wakes up again. One of Madara’s creepy white creatures pulls her forcefully over to him. She staggers at the tugging, her messily braided hair waving, but moments later she’s leaning over him. “Check on him.” The creature commands her.

Uzumaki-sama bares her teeth viciously. The creature sneers back but steps away from them, and Uzumaki-sama looks down at him. His worries immediately begin to fade away, because he recognizes the look she wears.

Suddenly, Obito can really see they she’s related to Kushina-chan, because she wears the same terrifyingly fierce expression he’s seen Sensei’s girlfriend wear.

“Hang in there.” She commands him, quiet and as fierce as her expression, and he feels his wavering determination solidify. Her hands glow faintly as she holds them over his chest and shoulder, but her gaze is locked on his as his discomfort begins to fade.

“I will, Uzumaki-sama.” He promises after a long minute and she nods

curtly.

“Good. And call me Sakura.”

Sakura worries constantly.

She worries about her usefulness to Madara wearing out before she’s ready. She worries about Obito’s body healing too slowly. She worries about the cave eating away at her damned sanity.

She worries about her clan, and she worries about Konoha. She worries about Kushina possibly being the one left in charge, and the mere idea of the woman standing in for her at Council meetings makes her heart twist with anxiety.

Kushina in charge would either hard-hand them into respecting her authority, or accidently bulldoze all of Sakura’s hard work in building up the Clan’s reputation.

If she’s anything like her son, it’ll somehow be the first option.

She worries constantly, and there’s little else she has to even do.

Except plot.

She plots, and she plots, and she plots.

The Gedō Mazō’s presence changes things. She hadn’t been able to make out the giant silhouette’s features before, but now she can recognize the shape of it’s head, looming behind Madara’s faint visage. Yes, the Gedō Mazō changes things.

She can get rid of Madara - but the statue, not so much. And if she can’t get rid of the Gedō Mazō, she can’t stop the Fourth War. Which means she can’t stop the Fourth War, period. She’d forgotten - or never known? - that Madara was the one to summon the statue out of the moon, not Pain. If it had been Pain, she had the chance of stopping him. She’d even had a tentative plan to try and assassinate the boy in Amegakure. Hanzō was dead, which meant that he’d either already killed the boy that made Nagato become Pain, or he’d died before he could with the new timeline.

Sakura didn't know for sure if Nagato was Pain or not - but she'd *planned* for it. She'd planned for the damned statue.

Now that plan was out the window. Whether Nagato is Pain now or not, he still has Madara's eyes, and the Gedō Mazō's still on the planet - which means Black Zetsu has everything he needs to bring the Jūbi back again.

Everything but his perfect slave and the Jinchūriki.

Sakura's gaze darts over to where Obito lies after a long day of attempting to walk.

He's almost there.

He's almost there, and Sakura's not sure what she'll do when he can make it.

She could kill Madara, but what could she possibly do about the Gedō Mazō? The Sage of Six Paths himself couldn't destroy the damned thing, what could she *possibly do* to it?

What could she possibly do about…

Sakura blinks.

And then she blinks again, her brow furrowing.

Maybe… just maybe…there was a way to stop Black Zetsu once and for all.

But first…

She needs to get out of this damned cave.

She waits three more days.

Three more days of basically starving, almost all the food going to Obito and Madara.

She's allowed to approach Obito, the intention for her to do as she has been - stand him up, steady him, and help him walk slow circles

around his bed.

But she doesn't reach Obito. She gets halfway there, and then she acts.

She wraps her free hand around the shackle on her wrist and pulls as hard as she can, the metal cutting into the flesh of her thumb joint. It only takes one brief, painful second, and then her hand is free and she is as well. She lunges, ducking under Zetsu's swinging arm, and charges even as her chakra wavers without the chain siphoning it away.

Madara has just enough time to stand before she's on him.

It's dark, so dark that she can barely see him - which is why she doesn't notice it in time.

The man is old, but he's not helpless.

Even as she swings at him, his *scythe - since when did Madara use a scythe?!* - sweeps up and sinks deep into her side.

The breath leaves her and she drops, catching herself on her knees, and the scythe is ruthlessly pulled away.

Her body feels cold and tingly.

The scythe trembles in Madara's grasp as he begins to move it again.

Sakura lunges, fist flying, and his scythe stops mid-descent when her hand goes straight through his chest.

Blood truly *flies,* Obito chokes, and Sakura watches Madara plummet.

She can hear things moving, so she moves herself. She jumps to her feet, staggering at the harsh sensation of *wrongness* in her side, and seizes Obito. "We're moving!" She snarls at the boy, gasping in breaths that should hurt a lot more than they do. Shock, she knows, and she's happy for it. It'll keep the pain away for a while longer - but not that long.

She needs to move, and fast. Obito stumbles at her side as she searches out the cave, looking for the entrance.

It's a massive boulder, reminding her of the one that had blocked the cave Gaara had died in once. She dives for it, Obito grunting in pain at their speed, and crashes her fist into it.

One excellent thing about Tsunade's strength technique is that it only requires a small bit of chakra. Just a flicker of it, carefully timed, and the boulder explodes under her touch. She hefts Obito up and throws him over her shoulder, ignoring his pained and startled grunt as she does. She hurries into the tunnel, moving as fast as her feet can carry her.

Yin Seal: Release! She makes the quick sign for it.

A faint trickle leaks through her body, her chakra redirecting to the wound in her side. It's deeper than she thought, and bleeding badly enough that the blood's already soaked down nearly to her ankle. "Behind us!" Obito screams out and Sakura twists, side protesting as she does, and roundhouse kicks a swirl-faced Zetsu.

She doesn't expect the way the swirls unfurl, fleshy spikes cutting like razors. "Ahg!" Sakura chokes out, pulling her foot back with five deep gouges in the skin. *Fuck this,* she pumps her chakra into her legs and focuses on *running like hell.*

"KATON! GŌKYAKŪ NO JUTSU!" Obito bellows, and heat bursts against her back. The creature cries out, sounding more like a sobbing child than a shrieking monster, and the noise makes her stomach twist sickeningly.

There was simply too much wrong with the pets of Madara.

No, the pets of *Kaguya.*

Sakura leaps over a chunk of rock, both her and Obito grunting when she lands again. She stumbles briefly, head rushing at the jump, before she shoves herself forward again. "You're bleeding." Obito says in a tone of realization. "*Really* bad."

She can feel the blood under her heel now, making her bare foot slippery.

"Well, you're not wrong." She huffs out, ignoring the blood - and ignoring the steadily growing amount of pain she feels from her side. Her Yin Seal is pathetically empty. Chakra still trickles from it, knitting together some of the damage, but the wound is bad. She can tell that much without having to see it.

It's bad, and so is their situation.

Sakura takes slow and steady breaths.

She keeps going.

Sakura can honestly say that the last place she expected the tunnel to dump them out in would be on the north-eastern border of Takigakure.

It's a day's run to the Land of Fire, three days to reach Konoha - and Sakura's already almost done with running.

Her left ankle wavers with every step and her right side burns like both fire and ice at once. Every breath feels like it's sucking away her life force, and it might as well be.

She's starved, chakra deprived, and missing a whole lot of blood.

"Obito." Sakura begins tiredly, the boy limping at her side now. What a pair they make, really. His right arm - or, rather, the flesh that *replaced* his right arm - is bound tightly to his side, wrapped up so thickly she can barely even tell it's there. "You might have to leave me behind."

"No." He instantly shoots down that idea. "No way. We're in this together, senpai."

"I'd really rather we weren't." Sakura protests weakly.

"Too bad." Obito fires back without hesitation, eyes blazing. "We're going together. We gotta keep moving. Just… keep healing, alright?" He says, wavering just a little as he looks at her blood-soaked side.

The gash slicing into her skin is still alarmingly huge, but at least the blood is finally slowing down. There's nothing left in her Yin Seal to heal herself, but she nods at Obito anyways. "I will." She lies - and he believes it.

If she starts to lean on him after a few more minutes of half-running, half-limping, he doesn't seem to notice.

By the time they reach the border, Sakura's being half-carried and half-dragged by a half-cripple.

It would be funny if it weren't so disturbingly ludicrous.

It's a group of five shinobi that find them - a skirmish team - and they make noises of shock when Obito introduces themselves.

It takes a second to confirm herself as an Uzumaki (her red hair and Uzushio hitai-ate, once she can lift her head enough to show it sitting on her forehead) and him as an Uchiha (his remaining Sharingan eye), and then they move so fast she's lost in a blur.

They're immediately picked up and carted back to the closest border posting.

Once there, the nearest medic-nin takes one look at her and knocks her unconscious while Obito makes a noise of alarm from her side.

The last thing Sakura remembers is thinking that the medic-nin is competent, at least.

She wakes up in Konoha, with Obito curled up on the bed next to hers. Sakura blinks at him through groggy eyes, half-turning towards him before she stops and leans back with a small groan.

Her side aches *viciously,* and after a moment of intense throbbing, she recognizes the sensation of stitches.

I haven't needed those in a long time, Sakura thinks, her mood darkening at that.

She's become too reliant on her Yin Seal. On her ability to heal herself on a second's notice. She's forgotten what it's like to not have the chakra or strength to just heal herself out of every situation.

She's gotten *careless,* and the thought makes her stomach twist sickeningly.

Naruto would be ashamed of me. Sasuke and Kakashi would be ashamed of me. Sakura thinks unhappily, and she lifts her good hand to cover her closed eyes. The three of them never stopped trying to improve,

never. And she had, to a deep cost. *Shit, I really fucked this one up.*

But…

She lowers her hand and looks up at the ceiling, brow furrowing in concentrated thought.

But that doesn't mean it has to *stay* fucked up.

There's a thought, a beginning fraction of an idea, stirring in her mind. She's carried it since the cave, but now that she feels halfway alive again, she can really start considering it.

And it might not be the worst idea ever.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

> “Think you lost your mind,
> Well don’t worry about it,
> Happens all the time,
> In the morning you’ll be better,
> Things are only getting better.” - Better, OneRepublic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Don’t ever do that again.” Kushina commands Sakura with a hint of a shake to her voice. She sounds angry, but Sakura suspects her hands and voice are shaking for a different reason. “I hated it. Every minute of it. I’m not cut out to be a Clan Head.”

“Bullshit.” Sakura says, so suddenly that Kushina stares at her blankly.

It is, Sakura realizes suddenly, probably the first time anyone outside of Akihito and Tsuru has heard her cuss since the fall of Uzushio.

“It’s not, though! I almost killed that Hiatari asshole. You should’ve seen the way he looked at me-”

“Couldn’t possibly be worse than the way he looked at me when I was thirteen years old claiming to be one of them.” Sakura cuts in mildly.

Kushina’s lips move soundlessly for a moment before she makes a wordless groan. “You’re impossible!” She complains. “I almost had to buy you a *fish!”* Kushina cries, suddenly throwing herself forward.

Sakura catches the woman carefully, gently redirecting her away from her bad side, and sets a hand on the back of her head. She sobs against Sakura’s left shoulder, her hands awkwardly clutching at Sakura’s sheets. “I hate it. I had to look at a koi fish to replace you, and it was horrible.”

Sakura grimaces at that. “I know.” She says earnestly.

Sometimes she wants to curse whoever started the koi fish tradition

without her knowing - but the rest of the time, she reflects that it was almost certainly Akihito who did it, and she can't argue with that. She'd never been able to argue with him.

Then again, she'd also never had to.

"I'm sorry, Kushina."

"And Minato!" She wails, sobbing against her. "He lost his genin, and I lost you, and we didn't know what to do, and we thought he was dead and you were too or being *tortured* and we couldn't do anything!"

Sakura hushes her, absently running her hand down the back of Kushina's head soothingly. "It's alright. We made it out."

"I know, but *we didn't know."*

The door creaks, interrupting Kushina's sobbing, and Sakura blinks at the sight of their new visitor.

She could honestly say she'd never thought she'd be happy to see Sarutobi, but there she was. "Kushina." She nudges the woman gently and she straightens, pulling away from Sakura to look at the Hokage. She instantly straightens, lifting a hand to rub at her eyes.

"Hokage-sama." Kushina chokes out, bowing once she's blotted her eyes dry.

"It's alright, Kushina-chan. I'm sorry for interrupting - but if I may have some time alone with Uzumaki-hime?" He asks politely.

Sakura instantly makes a gentle shooing motion at Kushina. The woman sniffles once before she nods and moves to the door. She mutters something quickly before leaving, and Sarutobi quietly closes the door behind her.

After a short pause, he steps closer and sits at her bedside. "I'm glad to have you back with us, Uzumaki-hime. I wanted to ask you about your experience."

She looks at him intently for a long minute, gauging his expression. He doesn't seem to have any idea at all what happened. Sakura glances sideways at Obito, who sleeps curled on his good side, his 'arm' strapped down to his side still. Her brow furrows with a new worry. She hadn't seen him wake up, but she's barely been awake herself. She hadn't taken that to mean that he *wasn't waking up.*

“Obito?” She questions, looking back to the Hokage.

Sarutobi frowns softly and she immediately knows she isn’t going to like this. “We’re treating him as an unknown right now. We’ve kept him unconscious while we examine his… adjustments… and wait for permission from a medic-nin to have him observed by a Yamanaka.”

“That’s a little much, isn’t it?” She demands instantly, offended. “He doesn’t deserve that treatment. He’s earned better.”

“Has he?” Sarutobi inquires, brow rising. “Tell me about it, then. Your experiences. How a dead child was returned to us alive, and what it is that is keeping him that way.” Sarutobi glances pointedly at Obito’s right side and Sakura grimaces.

“I can tell you everything. What you’ll *believe,* I’m not so confident of.” She says firmly, raising her head to meet his gaze. “I abandoned my post - I’ll admit that freely - when I felt Obito’s seal flare. It alerts me to injuries, you understand. So when I felt it flare, I rushed in, and with good timing. You’d have three dead children and one intact bridge without me.” She pauses. “...It *isn’t* intact, is it?”

“No.” Sarutobi confirms, frowning as he pulls out his pipe. “The mission was, in the end, successful - but with irrecoverable mortalities. Or so we thought.” He nods to her and Obito again.

“Good.” Sakura exhales a breath. “I’d worried.” She admits. “Regardless, back to the report. I found Rin and Kakashi surrounded by enemies, so I fought them and cleared a path for them to travel to the Bridge. When I was done dealing with them, I searched for Obito.” She pauses, hesitating for a moment. “I suspect he was at some point crushed by a boulder?”

Sarutobi blinks at her. “...Yes. Are you saying you did not find him in such a state?”

“I did not.” She confirms. “I found blood on and under the boulder - I threw it, slightly.” She says a little sheepishly, because she rarely uses her ‘super strength’. “But he wasn’t under it anymore. You may want to consult an *Uchiha* before a Yamanaka, because I’ve never heard of the Sharingan allowing dying children to teleport to safety, so I have to assume it’s some sort of clan secret.” She clears her throat at Sarutobi’s uncomfortably intense stare. “I found him beside the boulder. I’d started to heal him when I was attacked…”

“Madara Uchiha.” Sarutobi repeats quietly, the room darker now that the sun has fallen. It had taken nearly three hours to finish her tale - and for him to *believe* it. “To think he still lived… and you’re sure you killed him?” He asks.

“Yes. He was drawing on chakra from a… statue, thing, that had been imbued with the Shodai’s lifeforce, in order to stay alive. But I punched his heart out. He’s dead now, there’s no doubt about it.” She confirms grimly and Sarutobi exhales a long, smoky breath.

“To think…” He repeats softly, staring past her and at Obito. “And to think that a thirteen year old boy stared him down like you claim.” He murmurs, and before she can get offended at the implied doubt, he looks at her with an odd expression. “I met Madara when I was young, and he was young too. I was perhaps twelve. Never before had I met anyone so singularly terrifying, and never have I since. I could barely stand in his presence, much less hold so stubbornly against him.”

“He had a scythe. Obito thought he was a shinigami at first.” Sakura adds blandly. “I discovered the scythe the hard way.”

“Ah.” Sarutobi glances at her ribs before nodding in understanding. “Hm. A brave child.”

“Stubborn. Impossibly stubborn. No one else would get up and walk days after having a quarter of them cut off and replaced. The boy’s… what do you call it here? Will of Fire? Is unquenchable.” Sakura informs him matter of factly.

Sarutobi nods slowly and hums thoughtfully. “I hear he wishes to be Hokage.”

“I hear you already have your eye on someone.” Sakura notes mildly and Sarutobi offers her a bland smile.

“I do. Minato’s earned quite a name for himself already. I’ve never seen someone get a flee on sight order so quickly.”

“I’ve always been kill on sight. I’m much more *annoying* than terrifying, it seems.”

“On the contrary,” Sarutobi says lightly, “you underestimate yourself, Uzumaki-hime. Anytime I station you to a battlefield, the enemy

suddenly finds themselves ordered to a different place. They give up the fight as a lost cause once they see your seals, Uzumaki-hime."

Sakura stares at him, surprised. "....Do they really?" She asks, stunned, and he nods. "I always thought you just shifted me around so often to keep me from getting killed."

"Hardly. If I could, I'd station you in one place forever - Amegakure. But alas, your reputation precedes you now, just as my successor's does."

"Successor already?" She muses. "Officially speaking?"

"Unofficially speaking. I would like to wait until tensions ease somewhat before I paint a target on his back."

"His back is a very difficult back to target, Hokage-sama."

"You aren't wrong there, Uzumaki-hime." He agrees lightly, puffing at his pipe.

The mood darkens moments later as their minds catch back up to the subject.

"These… Zetsu, you called them. You tell me they can blend into any surface. Travel to any place. Is there any way they can be tracked?" He asks softly and Sakura hesitates for a moment.

"Only one that I can think of." She admits slowly, bracing for the backlash. "It's said that Mito-sama could sense the negative will of her enemies. I wouldn't suppose that has anything to do with the Kyūbi?"

Sarutobi stiffens, gaze going calculating as he eyes her balefully. "...That sort of knowledge isn't easy to come by, Uzumaki-hime." He tells her with a hint of a threat.

She arches a brow at him. "No. Not the least of which because I, myself, have kept that knowledge to myself. But I do know it. Our people kept thorough records, though they're now very much gone."

He stares her down for a very long minute before nodding and pushing to his feet. "I will speak to Kushina-chan. I will also sign off the order to allow Obito-kun to wake up. You two will remain together for now - it will be easier on your minds than separating you."

“The mentality of the tortured.” Sakura notes wryly and he inclines his head faintly. “Thank you Hokage-sama. It will help.” She confirms without shame. After two and a half weeks of captivity with only him (mostly unconscious) to work with, Sakura wouldn’t easily be separated from the boy.

Not so soon.

Sarutobi leaves with a small bow and Sakura’s left to her thoughts, which immediately go back to her previous train of thought, before Sarutobi had interrupted.

She had a plan to plot, and a seal to design.

It isn’t until the next day that Obito wakes up - and Sakura immediately starts to talk to the boy. He seems stricken by his situation, a combination of shocked and utterly horrified. “You’ll be different.” Sakura tells him quietly, sitting next to his bed with her IV stand dragged over. She’s not supposed to be up and walking around, but she did it anyways.

The boy is only thirteen, and to see him staring down at his unwrapped arm, discolored hand limp in his lap, is unbearable. “Different.” He repeats blankly.

“I know. It’s an understatement. You’ll be unlike anyone else, ever.” Sakura admits softly. “But that doesn’t matter, you know it doesn’t. Rin won’t care, it’ll only make her want to protect you more fiercely. Minato won’t care - you’re his genin, and he thought you’d died.” *Horribly. He thought you died horribly.* “And all Kakashi will care about is that you’re alive and have two hands to fight with.”

“Two hands.” Obito repeats again, but there’s a note of confusion - no, uncertainty - in his tone now. “Both?”

“Both.” Sakura confirms, reaching out to take his discolored hand. He flinches and so does she, just a tiny bit. It doesn’t feel like real flesh. It’s a bit too squishy, not quite settled into it’s new shape yet, and colder than skin would be. “Both hands, Obito. Just give it time.” She swears, holding the hand gently.

“How much time?” He chokes out and she looks up to see tears running down his face - from one open eye and one closed socket.

It breaks her heart a little bit.

How could she ever have looked at this child and seen the man he’d once become? The difference was *astronomical.*

She’ll never forgive herself for hesitating as long as she had. For condemning him to this experience.

“Not long.” She lies. “A month. Maybe two. You’ve only had this for two weeks and look at it already.” She lies and she lies some more.

It’s barely progressed at all. It’ll be maybe half a year before the boy can even throw a punch without outright losing the damn thing, even with her coaxing.

“Obito.” Sakura prods gently, turning around. She turns too much, but she ignores the pain flaring warningly at her side, reaching out and grabbing her bed tray with her free hand. It rolls over at her command, coming to a stop beside Obito’s own bed tray. “Will you help me with something?” She asks, gesturing to the pile of papers on the tray that she’d turned into a makeshift desk. “I’m inventing something. I could use a second set of eyes, and maybe you can even pick up a bit of fūinjutsu while you’re at it.” She suggests, and without waiting for a response, she picks up the first sheaf.

There’s a small part of a very big seal on the paper and she holds it up for Obito to see, carefully breaking it down to every tiny piece.

It takes nearly an hour to finish lecturing on just that one piece alone, and through it all, Obito remains silent.

But his eye follows her hand when she gestures with it, and Sakura will take what she can get.

Sakura wakes up early the next morning to muffled chatter and sobbing, and she opens one eye just enough to see Rin on Obito’s bed, hugging him tightly and crying, while he hugs her back, his head buried into her shoulder. Kakashi stands at the foot of his bed,

watching with the kind of haunted expression no nine year old should ever wear - and Minato standing guard by the door.

She drifts off for a while, not quite sleeping - not with other people in the room - and perks up again when she hears Rin speaking. “Maybe he needs his own room. Maybe he needs privacy. Should we ask…?” Rin asks quietly and Sakura tenses a bit.

She regrets it immediately, because Minato’s gaze flickers instantly to her, eyes narrowing a tiny bit in consideration. “No, Rin. That wouldn’t help either of them right now.”

“But-”

“No.” Obito cuts in, speaking of his own accord for the first time since their return. Everyone - even Sakura, through slitted eyes - looks at him. “No.” Obito repeats firmly. “Don’t separate us.” He adds more quietly, like he’s ashamed to say it.

“I wasn’t about to let that happen anyway, Obito.” Minato promises.

Obito relaxes, slumping against his bed, and Sakura allows her eyes to close again.

She listens silently as Minato explains to Rin just *why* separating them was such a bad idea, the kind of anxiety it would cause them both, and Sakura contents herself with the knowledge that the girl wasn’t about to make that same, unknowing mistake again.

There are rules in place for survivors of torture for a reason, and she's glad to be spared the panic of suddenly being alone after weeks with just him by her side.

Chapter End Notes

No cliffhanger this time! :P

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

> “We can climb high, higher than before,
> We could stand by while it burns to the floor,
> Though we cannot fly,
> We will build and the wounds will mend,
> As we build it once again.” - Once Again, Tristam

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s not until a week after their return that they’re released from the hospital. For a moment, Sakura and Obito stand at the front doors and stare awkwardly at each other.

She had spent most of the last days lecturing to a nearly unresponsive Obito about the basics of Uzumaki sealing, and they hadn’t spoken about anything else. So a goodbye wasn’t exactly on their usual track.

“...Do you have family waiting for you?” She asks, spotting Minato lurking not too far away.

Far enough away that Obito wouldn’t sense him. Far enough away that Sakura knows he’s respecting the boundary briefly put between him and his student. “No.” He admits quietly.

“Then come with me.” Sakura settles a hand on his false shoulder, ignoring his small flinch at the touch. She wonders how strange it must feel on *his* end. “I’ll show you my Clan’s compound.”

The amount of relief it visibly sends through Obito might be concerning, if it wasn’t after such a traumatic experience. They’d need to separate, but there was no need to do it so abruptly.

So to the compound they go. Sakura shows him around, introducing him to the people that flock to her, relieved to see their Clan Head safely returned to them. They smile at Obito, too, saying quiet but sincere hellos, and he offers them back. Quietly at first, but then louder and louder, until he sounds only a little subdued. By the time they reach Sakura’s house, he seems to have almost forgotten the reason for all his unease - the strange *thing* replacing what used to be part of his body.

“This is my koi pond. It’s… unique, for its fish.” Sakura quietly explains the reasoning behind the fish, what they represent. She shares her theory that it was Akihito who started the tradition, and then she explains who exactly Akihito even was.

It’s a long time before she stops talking quietly to the boy, and longer still before she silently shows him to her guest room and they retire for the night.

Kushina and Minato meet them in the morning.

By meet, she means infiltrates her home and cooks them breakfast.

After an awkward greeting from a tense, half-frozen Obito, they quietly tuck in and prepare for the day. “The Uchiha want to ‘meet’ with him?” Sakura questions when Minato tells her.

“Yes. And Kakashi. Obviously, it’s about your… eye.” Minato finishes uncomfortably. Obito grimaces before he looks up with a sudden, surprising ferocity. The same ferocity that had been missing ever since the cave.

“I won’t take it back. It’s Kakashi’s now, he better accept that.”

Minato blinks at him. “I think Kakashi wants to give it back - but more importantly, your Clan wants him to. They won’t easily take no for an answer.”

Obito straightens up, eyes blazing now, and opens his mouth-

“Yes, they will.” Sakura cuts in mildly, sipping at her tea.

Everyone blinks at her. “They will?” Obito questions. “I mean, yes! They will. But why? I was just going to tell them to shove it.” He admits.

“Perfect, because I’m going to do the same.”

It takes a moment, but then Kushina straightens. “Oh! You’re going to…?” She gestures vaguely at Obito and Sakura nods.

“I'm going to tell them to either accept Obito’s desires as the Clan

member in question, or sacrifice their right to call him a Clan member. The Uzu Clan is already made up of many different Clans. What's one more?" Sakura asks in the blandest tone possible.

It's hard to keep a straight face, but it's worth it when Obito laughs so hard he cries just a little bit.

Luckily, there was no need to go to such measures. Fugaku had clearly only called for the meeting at the urging of his Clan council, and he looked mostly bored throughout the whole thing. Sakura goes along with them, a silent presence behind Obito, and Minato stands with her. The meeting is short and simple.

"I'm not taking it back. Period." Obito says firmly, and refuses to hear otherwise.

When they leave thirty minutes later, the Clan is disgruntled at the refusal, but no one can force his hand. It's Obito's property, bizarre as it is to refer to it as such. "Well, you certainly have the stubbornness of an Uchiha." Fugaku murmurs as they file out of the building.

"Thanks?" Obito offers and Fugaku hums absently.

"It's the truth." He says flatly, arms folded across his chest and his hands tucked into opposite sleeves. "You've always had potential, Obito. I'm glad to see you're finally finding it."

"Thanks." Obito offers with just enough sarcasm to get by. Fugaku nods curtly at him, and then more politely to Sakura and Minato.

"Uzumaki-sama. Namikaze-san. Excuse me." He says, offering a short bow.

Sakura imitates it, Minato bowing more deeply, and Fugaku straightens up and immediately turns to leave. Sakura turns her gaze to Obito, eyeing him.

The days in the hospital had done much to help him regain some of his weight already - while Sakura still suffers from jutting ribs and sunken cheeks. But she was mostly starved for two and a half weeks - Obito had gotten much more food than she had. She wasn't

complaining - he looks better for it, less like the torture survivor she looks like.

She's glad for that.

He has plenty of psychological damage to work through after everything, but she'd spent two weeks alone with little other than her own mind. They'd barely needed to torment her - her own mind had played so many tricks on her she still sometimes thinks she sees Zetsu in the corners of her eyes.

Sarutobi had already spoken to Kushina, though, and the woman is working to use the Kyūbi to keep watch for the malicious creatures. It's only a matter of time before the woman figures it out, and then Sakura will be able to relax again.

Well.

'Relax'.

Her mind is constantly on another matter - the matter of a very specific, very new seal that she's still thinking up as she goes. It'll be complex, enough so that she plans on meeting with Kahan and Tabane both once she can.

Speaking of… "I'm afraid I need to go." Sakura tells Obito and Minato as they approach the Uchiha Clan's gates. She can see Rin and Kakashi's distinctive shapes waiting outside for them.

"You do?" Obito questions instantly, a bit alarmed, and Sakura shoots him an apologetic smile.

"Yes. I need to speak with my Clan in private. You can come for dinner, if you want, though. Both of you - I'm sure Kushina will be the one cooking it."

The woman was practically smothering Sakura, apparently under the belief that she'll vanish if Kushina takes her eyes off her for more than a few seconds.

"Ah. That sounds good to me." Minato glances at Obito, who does a bad job of hiding his relief and nodding.

"Yeah, sounds good." Obito confirms.

They'll have to work on spending more time away from each other -

but every time the boy's out of her sight, she gets twitchy and anxious.

It is, she suddenly realizes, probably how Kushina feels in regards to her.

Hm.

"Tonight, then. Now, excuse me." She bows to them, pausing when Minato hesitates.

"Rin wants to speak to you, when you have the time." He says, a little uneasily for some reason.

Sakura frowns for a minute, then glances out the gates where she can still see the two team members.

"...Invite her to dinner too, then. Both of them, actually." She suggests and Minato nods, looking concerned about whatever is on his mind. "Until tonight, then." She says, bowing minutely to the man, both he and Obito bowing deeply in return.

Sometimes, the position of Clan Head is a strange one - and having the future Hokage bow to her so lowly is beyond strange.

"We need a Hyūga." Kahan, the only one of the two Seal Masters off the battlefield for the moment, says as he looks over her work. "This is too reliant on the chakra pathways for us to *not* consult one."

"We can leave that until the last minute, can't we? Only when it's actually applied will we need that knowledge."

"Better to plan ahead, in case any of the other elements interfere with the pathways locations." Kahan points out and Sakura frowns.

"I suppose that's true. But I was thinking of simply placing it over the Eighth Gate and having it branch out from there. That way it can be applied to anyone that the situation calls for."

Kahan pauses at that, looking at her with sudden apprehension. "Sakura-sama, this seal will *kill* whoever it's put on."

It takes her a second to grasp his point and she can't help but roll her

eyes. “I’m not going to murder anyone, Kahan. Honestly, get your head out of the sand.” She huffs. He has the decency to look mildly abashed. “It’s top secret, I told you as much - but anyone who might use this seal will do it of their own accord, and for good reason.”

“But the Eighth Gate - why not the First Gate?” He asks uneasily.

“Because the Eighth Gate offers more power, and we’ll need that. Kahan.” Sakura’s voice softens, but her words are firm. “I need you to focus on doing your part here. Leave my part to me. I have enough to worry about on my own, I don’t need you worrying too.”

He looks a little uneasy still, but he nods at her. “Yes, Sakura-sama. I… believe I have an idea on how to balance the seal so that the user doesn’t run out of chakra before the captive does.” He offers slowly and she nods.

“Tell me more.”

Dinner with the team interrupts her Seals work. As expected, Kushina cooks enough food to feed an army, and that’s before Sakura remembers to warn her about the visitors.

With Kushina and Minato in the same room, the dinner is a lively affair. At the first sign of an impending argument (brought on by Kushina overreacting to something poor Minato had dared to say), Sakura nudges Obito for his attention, and together they escape the room just as the yelling begins.

He’s gotten quiet again, losing some of that fire he’d gotten back. She doesn’t ask him why, simply talks to him like she always does - nattering on quietly about this or that as they approach the koi pond. She goes silent for a while, watching the fish swim in slow circles around one another.

“Do you ever regret the tradition?” Obito asks quietly and she blinks, surprised to have him the one to break the silence for once.

“…Yes. Every time I put a new fish in the pond, I regret it.” She looks down at the fish, calmly swirling together. “I was your age when Uzushiogakure was destroyed.” She says softly. “I was thirteen when

my father watched Kirigakure's ships break through our seals and make for landfall. He gathered up his forces, he ordered Akihito to escort me to safety, and he ordered me to save as many people as we could. I did my best." Sakura explains. "I did my best. But by the time we reached Konoha, we had only fourteen of our shinobi left - excluding myself, and only a hundred and fifty civilians."

"If you were only thirteen, how did you become Clan Head?" He asks in mild confusion.

For a moment, she's startled. Then she realizes - of course they don't know. It's not something he'd be taught. Most of her Clan knew her from birth, and she's so used to that…

"My father was the Village Head of Uzushio."

Obito blinks at her. "Oh. Oh! That's why Hokage-sama calls you hime? I thought it was because of you… moniker."

"It's for both." She shrugs faintly. She tries not to let the title 'Dekishi-hime' bother her anymore. "But yes, I was Clan Head at thirteen. I was in charge of over a hundred and sixty people, charged with building them a new home and keeping them safe in it. It wasn't easy. It took me years. But I did it. I gave my people a home. I gave them a steady life. I gave them the chance to rebuild, and they have." Sakura pauses, watching the fish swim slow, steady swirls. "Akihito started this tradition when our first shinobi died. And I will be the one to uphold it, until the day that a koi fish is placed here in my own memory."

She breathes slow, careful breaths. "There were fourteen of us Uzushio shinobi left when we came to Konoha. Now there are only ten of us. How many more will we be losing before the war is over?" She wonders softly.

"Do you think it's going to go on much longer?" Obito asks with a hint of concern.

"Oh, yes." Sakura promises grimly, offering him an apologetic smile. "Much longer."

In her past life, it had lasted six years. In this world, the war had started later. If it ends at the same time, it'll have lasted four and a half years.

Three and a half more years to go.

After the arguing is done and they've cleaned up all the food, Rin corners Sakura in the living room while the others are starting to leave. "Train me." Rin says, and it's firm demand that manages to sound like a plea.

Sakura freezes, blinking at the girl in surprise. "Train you?"

"Please. You saved Obito's life, I *left him to die."* Rin's voice breaks, tears springing suddenly. "I left him and you saved him, please, please train me. I can't do that again." She sobs, reaching up to rub urgently at her eyes.

Sakura stares at her for a moment, remembering a time when she'd asked to be trained by the best medical ninja in the world.

She hadn't cried, but she'd been pretty close to it.

"I can't train you much." Sakura says slowly and Rin immediately sniffles back more tears, focusing on Sakura. "I'm going to be on the front lines a lot. But I can teach you some of what I know. You should ask Tsunade-hime to help you as well."

"I did." Rin admits sadly. "She wasn't interested. She has an apprentice."

Shizune? Already? Sakura frowns, trying to figure how old the woman would be now. Eleven? Twelve?

Well, no matter. "Then scratch that. I'll do the best I can, but I'm going to be back on the frontlines soon." Sakura eyes her, gaze momentarily lingering on Rin's purple tattooed cheeks.

...Maybe…

"Meet me here in the morning. First light. I want to see how good your chakra control is." Sakura commands.

The girl lights up like the *sun.* "Thank you! Thank you so much, I'll be here first thing!" Rin says quickly, bowing lowly to her.

"Make sure you are." Sakura says, then gently shoos the girl away.

She has work to do.

Chapter End Notes

All your awesome comments keep me going. Thanks so much for the kudos and reviews, I love each and every one of them.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

> “I feel the shadows hanging over,
> They’re waiting to come closer,
> To come and take me away.
> And I can feel my heart skip,
> Every time that I slip,
> I wanna run away.” - Closer, Lemaitre

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura was ten when she made a seal that changed the world. It changes the tide of war everywhere she goes, and she goes *everywhere.*

During her time away from the field, Sakura creates another seal. She’s ten when she changes the medical ninjutsu field forever, and she’s twenty-three when she changes the fūinjutsu world. Not that they’ll ever know it.

“It’s a work of art.” Kahan murmurs and Tabane grunts his agreement. “But how are you going to use it? And against what?”

“We’ll see.” Sakura offers with a shrug, pocketing the large scroll that detailed the forbidden fūinjutsu they’d just finished creating. She’d store it with the rest of the Clan jutsus later, after she’s come up with an obscure label for it. Something that wouldn’t give it away to any *snoopers.*

She secures the seal, burying away in the records they’d re-created after (or invented since) Uzushio’s fall.

There was one enemy out there that she’d yet to encounter - and this time she wouldn’t be caught by surprise.

Come and find me, Black Zetsu, she thinks with dark smugness, tucking the scroll into the massive bookshelf full of others just like it.

I’m waiting.

Sakura's twenty-four and the Third Shinobi World War has been *officially* going on for nearly two years, and unofficially for nearly four.

She's twenty-four and she's already survived the destruction of one village.

She nearly has to survive another.

"She was forced to carry the Sanbi." Obito had told her in her past life when they'd worked to save Naruto's life. *"Rin. Our teammate. She killed herself to stop the attack from happening."*

Sakura had known.

She still hadn't been prepared for it.

Rin doesn't die on her way to Konoha. She doesn't throw herself on Kakashi's hand. Obito, abandoning his order to rest and recover, had taken off the second word reached him that Rin had gone MIA.

He stops Kakashi, and then rushes to Sakura. "Please!" He begs, tears streaming down his face, and Sakura's already pushing to her feet to hurry to the emergency. "It's Rin - Kiri sealed a bijū in her, the seal's going to break once she gets here - and something won't let her stop running."

Something won't let her stop running, Sakura repeats in her mind even as she moves. "Follow me," She commands, flickering away and reappearing outside Kahan's home. Obito appears an instant later, and Sakura shoves the door open. "Kahan! Tsuru! I need you both, *now!"* She calls urgently.

Kahan's instantly there, flickering into the space before them. "What's going on?"

"We're going to have to seal a bijū."

"What?" Tsuru demands as she runs into the room, her two year old toddler clinging to her side and watching with wide eyes.

“It’s Rin - Kirigakure, they put the Sanbi in her. But the seal’s set to break once she reaches Konoha-” Obito starts and Sakura cuts in,

“And there’s a curse seal forcing her to keep moving.” She says with certainty. A curse seal is the only thing that makes sense.

“Kakashi’s holding her back, but Sensei’s on the frontlines. He isn't here and we need help.”

“And you’ll have it.” Kahan promises severely, turning to take Saka from Tsuru. “Tsuru?”

“Yeah.” The woman nods, flashing a grin with too many teeth. “I’m always ready for some jinchūriki wrangling. Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle to the girl - I can keep the bijū locked up tight in her until someone can seal it.”

“I’ll get Kushina to help me.” Kahan says quickly and Sakura nods.

“Let’s go. Obito, lead the way.”

The sweaty, tearful, wild-eyed boy nods, and flickers away faster than Sakura has ever seen him move. She follows with Tsuru at her side.

They don’t stop until they’re a quarter of the way to the Kirigakure border - where they find Kakashi facing against no less than thirty hunter-nin and trying to stop Rin at the same time.

“Obito, help Kakashi. Tsuru.” Sakura nods to the enemies and Tsuru grins again.

Between Tsuru’s chains whipping around and Sakura’s explosive punches and swordwork, the hunter-nins are dealt with in less than five minutes.

The second the last one falls, Tsuru’s chains whip out to grab Rin.

“I have to keep moving!” Rin wails as she goes down and Sakura quickly moves to her side. Rin wriggles frantically against the chains and Sakura kneels down, pressing a hand to her chest.

It takes only a small pulse of chakra for the blood to rush from her face.

Oh, no.

There’s a curse seal, alright.

And it's directly on Rin's heart.

Sakura closes her eyes, both to hide her grief and to concentrate. She tries to think, to come up with some way to remove it - but curse seals are notoriously touchy. The slightest shift and they lash out violently. With it on Rin's *heart…*

"Why aren't you doing anything?" Rin whispers, voice fearful.

Sakura doesn't open her eyes, trying to think of *anything.*

The idea that strikes her is a very unpleasant one.

She opens her eyes, wetting dry lips, and looks up at a hesitant-looking Kakashi. Obito looks almost as afraid as Rin herself does. "Kakashi." She starts, faltering for a second. She looks away from them, closing her eyes. "Get Obito out of here."

"What?" Obito hoarsely asks. "No, no, no no are you saying you can't help her? I'm not- Kakashi, *get off me!"* Obito snarls, fighting violently. Sakura grimaces deeply, opening her eyes to meet Rin's.

"I might be able to save her," Sakura says loudly, momentarily silencing Obito. "But I need you to leave. Now."

This time, there's only silence before Kakashi flickers away, dragging Obito with him.

"Rin." Sakura says gently, reaching back to draw a kunai. "I'm very sorry for this. But if it works, you'll be okay."

Rin looks up at her with silent tears running down her face.

She doesn't say anything at all.

Not even when Sakura takes the kunai in both hands and plunges it into her heart.

She's still struggling with the curse seal when Kahan arrives with Kushina at his side. Kushina gasps sharply at the sight.

Sakura's hand is buried in the girl's chest, her other hand gripping the

bloody kunai she'd used to pierce it. "Curse seal directly on the heart," Sakura explains quickly, eyes narrowed and focused. "I already removed the kill factor, but I'm having trouble removing the control part."

She doesn't mention that she did that by impaling her heart and then healing it.

Kahan crouches down across from her, glowing hands reaching out to touch Rin, and he inhales harshly at the state of the girl. "Kami, you're butchering her."

"Needs must. The *seal* is butchering her, I'm just trying to remove it." Sakura grunts, glaring at the bloody mess her hand is shoved into. She sends a small jolt of chakra through the seal, trying to discern what part to break up next.

"Stop. I can take it from here. Just keep her alive for me." Kahan instructs. Sakura pulls her hand out and Kahan grimaces thickly before sliding his own hand in. He grimaces further at the sensation and his brow furrows in concentration once he's touching the seal.

"Tsuru?" Sakura questions and the woman, sitting cross legged a couple feet from Rin's head, offers a faint shrug.

"It's struggling. I think her not moving is trying to make the seal unravel, but I'm keeping it in place." She explains. "But it's thrashing."

Swear beads at Rin's forehead, the girl unconscious but still no doubt feeling the pain.

"At least the chakra's separate from her network. That's why it'll get free the second this seal pops." Kahan explains, frowning deeply at the girl. "It's not connected to her properly."

"Does that mean we can let it free and you can reseal it in her properly? Or will it coming free still kill her?" Sakura demands, looking up at Kahan.

The man's brow furrows uneasily. "I'm not sure. But I don't think we'll need to. I think… I've almost got the curse seal… if I just layer another seal on top of the *bijū* seal, we should be in the clear." Kahan pauses for a moment, sweat rolling down his temple. "I think I've got it. Be ready to heal her, this might be bad."

"How bad?" Sakura asks and Kahan grimaces.

“I’m not sure.”

Sakura lifts her free hand and made the sign with it. *Yin Seal: Release! Strength of a Hundred!*

Her chakra flares and Sakura hopes Obito and Kakashi don’t come running at the sensation of it. Black bars sweep down her face, shoulders, and to her hands, then stretch out across Rin’s body. “Do it.”

There’s a flicker of chakra from Kahan, and blood sprays. He flinches away from it, the arterial spray cutting off a split second later. “I got it.” Kahan says quickly, pulling his hand out. The hole in her heart seals, and the hole in her body closes up a moment later. Kahan breathes a couple harsh breaths, then places both his hands on Rin’s stomach. “I need to seal it properly.”

For a second, Sakura thinks about the only jinchūriki sealing she *knows.* The one where Minato had traded his own life to seal the Kyūbi. Her stomach turns and she looks anxiously at Kahan. “Can you do it? Safely?”

“Well.” Kahan pauses before offering up a pained smile. “It’s only three-tails. I should be alright.”

“I’ll hold it down for you, honey.” Tsuru promises seriously and Sakura reaches out to plant her hands over Kahan’s. The black lines spread across his arms and he inhales sharply at the chakra input.

“Ah. That’ll help.” He exhales harshly, then takes a deep breath and braces himself. His chakra thrums to life, flowing into Rin for a moment - and then shooting out. A seal spiderwebs out from his palms, glowing dark blue and faintly purple. Sakura twitches at being in the center of it but doesn’t move since Kahan doesn’t tell her to.

“I’m going to use a Four Symbols Seal.” Kahan explains, breathing out a slow breath. “Brace yourself, Tsuru.”

“I’m bracing.” Tsuru says, a hint of worry in her flippant response.

Kahan’s lips give a tiny twitch before the fingertips on his bottom hand glow like blue fire. “Here goes. *Shishō Fūin!”* He shouts, twisting his hands under hers. The seals around them moves like fire, sizzling as it shrivels up into a solid seal on Rin’s stomach.

A seal that looks freakishly familiar. *Naruto,* Sakura recalls the same

seal. Kahan pants softly but moves his hands, shifting them into the opposite position they'd started it. "I'm adding a second layer. Let go of it, Tsuru."

"If you're sure." Tsuru says a bit quietly, carefully pulling back the chains. Kahan, breathing heavily, braces himself again. He repeats the seal, placing another one on top of the first, upside down and mirrored to the first.

"There." Kahan says breathlessly, pulling a bloody hand back to rub at the sweat on his forehead. "If that doesn't hold the damn thing, we're screwed."

"That's the spirit." Tsuru chimes in, sliding behind Kahan to set her hands on his shoulders, rubbing at them distractedly. "You alright?"

"Might need some help getting home." He admits.

"You got it. Piggy-back?" Tsuru suggests brightly. Kahan huffs out a laugh.

Sakura leans down and slides her arms under Rin, lifting the unconscious girl. "Get back to the compound. Take some rest. I'll speak to the Hokage." Sakura says much more seriously.

She looks at Rin's pale face, at the seal glowing faintly through her shirt, and wonders just how badly this was going to end.

"Kirigakure won't stand for this." Sarutobi confirms her grim thoughts as they hover over Rin's form. She's in an underground, private room - secluded from the rest of the hospital. There's six others of them under there - Tsunade, Fugaku, Hiashi, Shikaku, the Hokage, and Sakura herself.

"They'll be furious. They'll demand the return of the bijū and play as though we stole it from them. It won't reflect well on us." Shikaku agrees darkly, arms folded across his face.

Hiashi, who had just recently replaced his elderly father as Clan Head, eyes the girl with his Byakūgan. "It's settled into her chakra system. If it's removed now, it'll kill the girl." He glances at her as he says it and

she grimaces.

“We had two choices. Seal it properly, or let it get unleashed in the middle of the damned forest outside Konoha.”

“Yes. And now we may have to ship a Konoha chūnin off to Kiri to make amends.” Fugaku says darkly.

“Bullshit.” Tsunade barks out sharply, glaring at Fugaku. “Like hell will we be kowtowing to the same fuckers who would put a monster in a fourteen year old girl and send her off to destroy her own home. She nearly killed herself just to be freed of it.”

“And she’ll do it again before she goes into Kirigakure’s hands. She’s a true Konohan.” Sakura agrees instantly, straightening her spine. “I won’t agree to that.”

“Fuck them, this is war. I say we send a public *thank you* to Kiri, one that every country will hear. Shame them so bad they don’t show their faces again.” Tsunade suggests with a smile that looks like it should have fangs.

“I say we send her to the front lines.” Fugaku chimes in unexpectedly. “Send her against Kiri with her team, and your jinchūriki hunter.” Fugaku glances at her and Sakura can’t help the way her lips twitch at the title.

“Tsuru. My cousin.” Probably her cousin, at least. Very distant, no doubt, just like Kahan.

“Yes. She can suppress the bijū if it gets to be too much for the girl.”

“As entertaining as the idea,” Sarutobi says dryly, “we need her elsewhere.”

Sakura blinks. “Like on the Iwa border, perhaps?” She suggests lightly.

Sweet as Rin was, she had a small vengeful streak. Sent against Iwa, who had nearly killed her teammate? She’d do alright there.

Shikaku glances at her, eyes narrowing slightly before he nods to Sarutobi. “We could always use more healers there. And the Suna border.”

“I’ll handle Suna.” Sakura says before looking over at Tsunade. It was rare for them to be off the front lines at the same time, and it’s still

difficult for her to look at the woman, but she does her best. “You’re back on Ame, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. With my idiot teammates. Honestly, you Uzushio people had the right idea with nixing the three-man parties.” Tsunade complains and Sakura’s lips twitch a tiny bit.

“Tsunade-chan.” Sarutobi sighs plaintively.

The war presses on.

Chapter End Notes

We're getting closer and closer...

(At one point, I thought this story was going to be only 5 chapters long. Man was I wrong)

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

> “I swallow the sound and it swallows me whole,
> Till there’s nothing left inside my soul.
> I’m as empty as a beating drum,
> But the sound has just begun.” - Drumming Song, Florence + The Machine

“I need you to save them all.”

The Sage of Six Paths’ words echo in her mind as Sakura watches over the battlefield. She’s holding her sword at her side, Hiashi at her back as they catch their breath.

“I need you to save them all,” he’d said.

Save them all.

It was easier said than done.

She barely was even able to save Obito and Rin.

I’ve taken as many lives as I’ve saved. Maybe more. Maybe less. She muses, watching the shinobi clash just a few yards away from the hill she and Hiashi are perched on. *How can I save lives when I’m too busy ending them?*

“Uzumaki-sama.” Hiashi begins severely and Sakura nods, lifting her sword without another word.

“Let’s go.” She agrees, the two of them lunging back into battle.

It’s nothing like having Akihito by her side.

But it works.

“The mark on your shoulder,” Hiashi juts his chin slightly towards her

bicep. She glances down at the black, innocuous looking kanji.

The kanji for ‘shinobi’, just as it had been on her hitai-ate in another life.

“What of it?” She asks politely and Hiashi frowns softly.

“I apologize if I am not meant to ask - but it is a seal, is it not?”

She arches a brow. “It is a seal - and it’s not rude to ask, but it would be rude to ask what it *does*. Though I don’t mind sharing the basics.” Sakura reaches up to tap the stationary seal. “It’s a barrier seal, to activate in case anyone tries to take control of me.”

Hiashi’s brow furrows. “Take control of you? Is that a concern?”

“Perhaps not. But someone put a seal on a fourteen year girl that made her run full speed to her own home, knowing she’d arrive only to destroy it all.” Sakura points out mildly. “So I figured it’s best to be safe rather than sorry.” She shrugs faintly, returning to running a stone down the edge of her blade.

“I’ve noticed something about you, Uzumaki-sama.”

“Oh?” She asks curiously, looking over at him. The glow from the fire between them makes his face shadow eerily.

“You’re a very meticulous woman. You never do anything without good reason, and I know that barrier seals are some of the most complex fūinjutsu. You wouldn’t put that much time and effort into a vague possibility.” He says confidently, pupiless eyes burning into hers, and she can’t help the way her heartrate picks up.

“...I don’t know what you mean, Hyūga-sama.” She lies quietly.

“No.” Hiashi says agreeably. “I don’t suppose you would.” He suddenly rises to his feet, straightening out his sleeves before bowing to her. “Excuse me. I must find my brother.”

Sakura bows her head in return, pausing to watch him leave.

When he’s gone, she looks down at her bicep and the kanji tattooed onto it. *Shinobi,* it might mean.

But it also means *Endure.*

She comes back to Konoha just in time for the first Uzu clan member to graduate from Konoha's Shinobi Academy.

She goes to the graduation personally, clapping and smiling at the boy in question.

Keiki Uzu, the first Uzu-named child to become a shinobi.

The celebration is both enthusiastic and tinged with sorrow.

"I've come to a decision," Sakura tells Kushina as they watch over the celebrations, just off to the side for a moment. "About the koi pond."

"What about it? You aren't thinking about getting rid of it, are you?"

"No, no." Sakura shakes her head quickly, frowning. "No, I want to make it into an official monument. A monument for the fourteen shinobi who established the Uzu clan."

"I think… that that's a good idea, Sakura." Kushina says slowly and thoughtfully.

They fall silent for a long minute before Kushina looks over at her.

"Minato's going to ask me to marry him."

Sakura blinks rapidly, then looks over at her. "He is?"

"Oh, yes." Kushina's eyes glint in spite of the darkness around them. "He thinks he's subtle. It's cute, and kind of embarrassing. But I wanted to ask… can he move into the compound? With me?"

Sakura's brow furrows slightly. "Of course he can. But… you realize that his position is… changing, yes?"

"Changing?" Kushina stares at her blankly.

Suddenly, Sakura can see the resemblance to Naruto in a bad way. "He's made quite a name for himself, hasn't he?" Sakura says slowly.

"Yes?"

"And the Hokage has taken notice."

"…So?"

Kami have mercy. "The Hokage's gotten very old, hasn't he? Perhaps he's a bit *tired?"* Sakura says very, very slowly.

It still takes Kushina a minute, and then her cheeks color. "Oh, oh of course. Right. Yeah, that…" She trails off, then looks at Sakura with wide, excited eyes. "A successor?"

"The successor."

"But what about that genin team member of the Hokage's. The creepy snake one."

"Orochimaru? He doesn't have the charisma for the position, Hokage-sama knows that, I'm sure. Though I'm not sure Orochimaru knows it."

Orochimaru hadn't really *snapped* until Minato was elected the successor, and even then, he hadn't been caught until after the Yondaime's death.

Sakura briefly wonders if she could somehow change that, but dismisses the thought quickly. Orochimaru's path was set, unless Tsunade's continued presence in Konoha somehow changes that.

In her previous life, it had taken him dying to even consider working for the right side.

"Regardless, it's fine. But bear in mind that Minato's pending status might demand you move to a more centralized, public area. He'll need that, not the closed off nature of our Clan's compound."

"Right. Yeah." Kushina bites her lip, suddenly looking nervous. "I'll have to talk to him about that. I can't leave the compound."

"You can't?" She questions, frowning at Kushina. "If this is because you help me with running everything, your assistance is invaluable but I can always hold down the fort on my own."

She definitely couldn't. She had barely lasted a week last time.

"Bullshit." Kushina snorts softly before frowning again. "I can't leave because you're going to make me your successor."

Sakura blinks once.

She considers that point.

The woman *had* managed to spend nearly a month as Clan Head, and almost no one got hurt in the process. Her reputation was unmarred, her Clan's reputation unmarred, and nothing had gotten destroyed except a couple of desks.

"...Alright." Sakura agrees slowly. "You're my successor." Sakura nods to confirm her own words and Kushina lights up, smiling so bright it's almost blinding.

It's only after Kushina leaves in a happy rush that Sakura realizes her mistake.

If Sakura never has children to becoming the successor by right of blood, then Kushina's child would.

Which means *Naruto* would be next in line to be the head of her Clan.

...I need to find someone before that mess happens. Sakura realizes.

If only she had the *time.*

"Concentrate." Sakura tells Rin gently, watching the girl work.

It's early morning, the sun shining brightly, the bird singing in the sky, and the river water trickling quietly behind them.

It's peaceful enough to almost forget that there's a war going on.

"You're trying too hard." Sakura warns Rin, just before the lung the girl's working on expands so much it starts to tear. "Stop." Rin stops, shoulders slumping. "It's a difficult jutsu, but you have the control for it. Let it come naturally to you. As natural as it is for you to heal it." Sakura nods her head to the tears and Rin silently and easily heals them.

They're in Training Ground Three, the same training ground her team had used in her dreams, and the lung is sitting on the same wooden post that Naruto had once been tied to.

"Try again." Sakura instructs.

“It wouldn’t be so hard without the Sanbi’s chakra.” Rin sighs. Her hands glow gentle blue and the lung starts to carefully inflate and deflate. It’s too shallow at first, then too deep a breath, and then too shallow again.

Sakura doesn’t let herself sigh. She lets the gentle breeze calm her, the leaves rustling in the trees, and she forces herself to stay relaxed.

Sometimes she feels like she’ll never truly be at peace again.

She spends her twenty-fourth birthday sleeping off three straight days of hell on the Iwagakure front. Rin takes over in her absence, doing a remarkable job.

Sakura wonders if it’s time to take on an official apprentice.

“You won’t ever have the chakra to use the seals like I do,” Sakura warns her. “Tsunade-hime would be a better choice to train you, but she has an apprentice. After the war’s over, you should ask her, though. Her methods don’t require so much chakra.”

Rin nods sharply at that, eyes blazing and jaw set, and Sakura wonders if this is what Tsunade saw when she came to the woman, demanding to be taught.

“I’ll tell the Hokage, then. He’ll post us together so you can learn while we’re deployed.”

“Yes, Sakura-sensei.”

Sakura smiles at the fourteen year old girl.

The girl smiles back.

In another life, she would have died several months ago, her heart wrapped around the hand of her own teammate.

In this life, she has the potential to be so much more than just a painful memory.

There's a celebration.

A celebration of the arrival of Autumn, the air cooler and the leaves turning colors. It's a beautiful celebration.

Sakura could do without the formalities, though.

Being a Clan Head meant looking important at such activities, and she's wearing no less than five layers of kimonos. At least it's Autumn, so she only feels a *little* like she's dying.

"You look like you're dying." Shikaku's bland voice startles her from her thoughts. He's well-dressed as well, but not quite as extravagantly as her.

It's not fair. "Did you know that in virtually every other species, it's the male who has to 'dress up' to attract a female to them?" Sakura asks him and he blinks at her, one brow lifting. She gestures vaguely to herself. "I feel cheated."

Shikaku snorts softly. "Well, I don't envy you."

"You wouldn't, would you?" Sakura sighs heavily, eyeing his simple, two layer kimono. "I hear you're to be wed soon."

Shikaku sighs this time, but it's a long-suffering one. "An arranged marriage. A pain in the ass, but worthwhile in the long run. I'm sure Yoshino and I will learn to cope." He sighs again, then glances at her. "You should consider the same."

"An arranged marriage?" Sakura questions, shooting him an incredulous look. "To *who?"*

"Whoever you find worthy. As Clan Head, you hold the power to choose."

"Yes. But you wouldn't bring this up to me without reason, Nara-sama. So why did you?"

Shikaku is silent for a long minute, watching over the festivities. It takes her some time to realize he's looking at someone in particular. Or rather, a group of someones. The Sennin and Dan, happily alongside his wife.

The sight still makes an unnerving chill go down her spine.

“Jiraiya-sama is very skilled in seals, and possibly the most important member of Konoha - just behind the Hokage, myself, and yourself.”

“So the fourth most important.” Sakura corrects absentmindedly, eyes drawn to the way Tsunade casually rests her hand on Dan’s shoulder, laughing at something her husband had said.

“You watch him often. And her. He watches her, too.”

“You watch too much.” Sakura scolds softly, not taking her eyes off the happy couple. She’s unnerved but not surprised that Shikaku’s noticed her staring at Tsunade. She *is* surprised that he’s misinterpreted it.

“It’s unusual to find someone so close to being your equal, Sakura-sama.”

“She’s better than me.” Sakura snaps, so suddenly it catches herself off guard, and she winces. She can never be off guard around the man, never. It gives him too much information.

“It seems to me that you’re better than both.” Shikaku argues lightly.

“I *know* seals, but I don’t make them. I can break them down, piece by piece, but I do a poor job of it. There’s too much that goes into each seal. Jiraiya-sama’s a seal master. And Tsunade-sama… she can do everything I can do, but she uses skill where I use pure chakra.”

“Your seals count as a skill, I should think.”

“I had help.” Sakura says waspishly, her grip on her glass becoming precariously tight.

“From your cousin?” Shikaku asks almost idly.

“From my friend. He never made it out of Uzushio.” Sakura replies coldly, eyes narrowed.

There’s a small pause in their small verbal war. “I’m sorry for your loss, Uzumaki-sama. I overstepped.”

“Which overstep are you apologizing for?” Sakura demands pointedly, then takes a careful drink of her sake. “Why Jiraiya-sama? What makes you think we would even get along?”

“You share interests. He’s the only one outside of myself who comes close to your position. I’m taken, as we already covered. He also has

an interest and an affinity for sealwork, which your Clan is famed for."

Which Uzushio was famed for, Sakura corrects in her mind, and for the first time in a long time, the thought makes her throat ache.

She watches Jiraiya, the way the man moves, the way he smiles at Tsunade - pained but genuine. He's young to her, now. There's only a ten year difference between them. He's still the lecherous old man she knew in her past life and that immediately makes her want to turn away, but…

But…

She also knew how much of that was him coping without Tsunade.

She remembers his last days, when he and Tsunade had gotten closer and closer.

He knew how to treat love with care - and perhaps this one knows it, too.

"You see it, don't you?" Shikaku muses and she offers a faint hum, still studying Jiraiya. "The potential. You could make him great."

"Enough." Sakura says quietly but firmly. "I'll consider your idea - but I have no intention of wedding *anyone* anytime soon. There's a war going on, Shikaku-sama. I have responsibilities out there, not in here, in these kami-forsaken clothes."

"Festivals are here for a reason." Shikaku points out and Sakura sneers softly before she sips at the sake, forcing herself to relax.

"Yes. To calm the civilians, to increase morale for the shinobi forces. But we're not civilians or ordinary shinobi, are we?"

"No. And that's why we're here speaking while they're down there celebrating." Shikaku agrees with a grim, tired sigh. "Even Tsunade-hime celebrates."

Something about that prickles at her. Another chill down the spine. Sakura watches, poised for danger like someone just out of a war zone would be. But Tsunade is relaxed, laughing with Dan and smiling at a murderous teammate and a lovestruck one.

Sakura stands ready, but Tsunade celebrates.

It should feel good. Sakura gave her that, after all. Without her, Tsunade would be across the country drinking herself into a coma instead of…

Instead of relaxing and being able to forget the war for a minute.

Sakura blinks slowly, Shikaku's words radiating in her mind until she finds what's bothering her.

"You call her hime, but not me." She notes, finally turning to actually look at Shikaku. He's looking at Tsunade, eyes narrowed, and there's a strange expression on his face.

He sips at his own sake before answering. "Because she's a hime, Sakura-sama." He looks over at her, eyelids shadowed and a hint of approval on his face.

"You are no hime."

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

> “Take it from me
> It’s got a mind of its own and it stings
> Nothing can stop me
> Nothing holds me back
> Think you could slow me down?
> There ain’t no turning back.
> Take it from me.” - Take It From Me, Kongos

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura’s hands shake.

They always shake when it comes to this.

Her hands shake, water splashes, and a new fish finds it’s home in her koi pond.

“I’m so sorry, Kahan.” She whispers to the bright red fish.

At her side, Tsuru watches silently, but their three year old daughter cries.

She’s twenty-five and it’s summer, nearly a year since the festival, when she comes across the Sennin on the battlefield. They’re on the Kiri border, for once, fending off a vicious assault. No doubt gnawing at the bit to have the Sanbi back. Tsunade’s in the rough of it, looking exhausted as she uses Katsuyu to heal those around her. Sakura immediately goes to her side, Jiraiya and Orochimaru looking (and sneering) at her when she arrives. “Tsunade-sama.” She greets politely. “Let me take over.” Tsunade instantly glares at her and Sakura quickly offers, “We can switch off.”

“Fine. I’m going to the tents, then.” Tsunade huffs, cutting off her Yin seal.

Sakura takes her place, passing the woman a stack of seals as she goes by. Tsunade scowls a bit but takes them. “Just put them on anyone you see bleeding.” Sakura says and gets a curt nod for her efforts.

“Jiraiya?” Orochimaru questions and the man huffs.

“I’ve got it. Go, take all the glory.” Jiraiya says plaintively and Orochimaru flashes a smirk - an actual, genuine, not evil-looking smirk - before he dives into the battle. Jiraiya hovers near her, silently watching her Yin seal unravel. “How is it you and Tsunade both know that seal?”

“It’s an Uzumaki forbidden fūinjutsu.” Sakura explains. “She learned it from her grandmother, I expect, and I learned it from a scroll my father had.” *And from Tsunade in a past life.* “It’s the same seal, but don’t mistake it for having the same purpose.”

“I wouldn’t. I can tell the difference, thank you very much.” Jiraiya snorts. “You just use yours for pure chakra storage. Tsunade-hime uses it as an actual jutsu designed to fuel Katsuyu.”

“You are correct.” Sakura acknowledges, closing her eyes for a moment. She can feel Tsunade planting her seals and she carefully begins to channel her chakra into them. “My Yin seal acts as a central network to power each individual seal I place - or have someone else place. It helps me to-”

There’s a roar.

A very loud roar, and a terrifying flare of chakra, so overpowering that it makes her own chakra waver in response. She opens her eyes.

“Oh, shit.” Jiraiya says, blinking rapidly. They can’t see it itself - but they can see the way the chakra makes the trees sway with it’s pure *density*.

“That’s a Jinchūriki, yes?” Sakura asks blankly.

“Ah-huh.”

“Shit.” Sakura echoes his curse.

Tackling a Jinchūriki is hell. It takes all four of them to do it. Orochimaru using jutsu to distract it, Tsunade using Katsuyu to protect those in it's radius while also punching the ever living shit out of it, and Sakura herself helping Orochimaru distract it. She cuts at the partially unleashed bijū with her sword, and uses jutsu in between. The monster snaps between all three of them while Jiraiya works out a seal.

It takes nearly fifteen minutes for him to finish it, and another five to apply it.

By the end of it, they're thoroughly exhausted - though Orochimaru pretends he isn't.

In the aftermath, Sakura finds herself sitting next to Jiraiya, struggling to catch their breath, with Orochimaru and Tsunade across from them. "That was good seal work." Sakura commends and the man looks at her in surprise.

"Oh. Thank you." He says in the tone of a man not used to praise, and that makes her frown a little.

"Very good seal work, in fact." Sakura says, and mentally curses Shikaku for what comes out next. She wipes her face with a small rag, frowning deeply before turning her head towards Jiraiya. "You should come by my Clan's compound when we get back. Tabane is a seal master - he's teaching Kushina everything he knows. He wouldn't mind teaching you as well."

Jiraiya blinks rapidly, dead silent for several awkwardly long seconds. "Answer, you idiot." Tsunade commands, reaching across to punch Jiraiya's knee.

"Ow!" The man complains, Orochimaru giving an amused - *an amused!* - snort. "Oh, uh." Jiraiya looks over at her and offers a hesitant but genuine smile. "I would be honored to accept, Uzumaki-hime."

Don't call me that, she wants to snap, biting the tip of her tongue to hold it back. She just nods at first, and when she's pulled herself together, she speaks. "It would be our pleasure, I'm sure. Perhaps you could even teach Tabane in return - you use a different style than ours, after all. I'm certain he'd be interested."

"I- yes, sure. I can do that." Jiraiya awkwardly reaches up to rub the back of his head, his smile widening a bit. "How can I say no to an offer from someone as beautiful as you?" He asks charmingly.

Too charmingly. He *oozes* it and she can hear Orochimaru sigh as she stares blankly at Jiraiya.

“Too much. Take it down a notch, then we can talk.” Sakura tells him before shoving to her feet and walking away.

She’s almost to the nearest medical tent when she hears him call, “You mean there’s a chance?”

Shikaku’s words haunt her step.

So does Jiraiya.

Even when she’s covered in blood, he still sidles up and smiles at her like she’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen. It’s flattering.

It’s also over the top, as with everything he does.

She doubts she could ever *love* the man - and doubts he could ever truly love her, as well.

But the idea of having someone is becoming more tempting the longer he pursues her. Having someone there to wake up to, to eat breakfast with, to drink tea with. Someone just to *have there,* even if it’s nothing more.

“You love her.” Sakura murmurs to Jiraiya when he accosts her in relative privacy. They’re on the outskirts of the camp, the sun going down and the sky bleeding red. Jiraiya’s glowing smile falters. “Tsunade-hime, that is.”

The smile is gone, now.

“I’ve seen you watch her.”

“I’ve seen *you* watch her.” Jiraiya says with sudden seriousness. “You’ve lost something too, haven’t you?”

“I suppose I have.” *But not the same thing as you. Not even close.* “But you love her still. Why do you pursue me?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Jiraiya’s smile is coming back now, with a tinge of

bitterness to it. “You’re young. You’re gorgeous.” She can’t help the way her cheeks warm at that. “You look incredible all of the time. When the sun meets your hair, it’s the most beautiful color I’ve seen.” He reaches up, hand rising slowly, but she doesn’t try to avoid it. His fingers brush against her cheek, taking a lock of hair between his fingertips and tucking it behind her ear. The rest of her hair is in a braid that was tight at some point, but has come loose in the chaos of battle.

“It lights up like wine and makes your eyes look warm instead of cold.” He goes on, staring at said eyes. His face is soft, so genuine it makes her heart ache a bit - because she *knows* they’ll never be each other’s first choice in life. “You care about your comrades as if they were your own family, and I love seeing that in a woman. You *care,* and a lot of people forget to.”

“Tsunade-hime cares.” Sakura points out and Jiraiya winces slightly.

He looks pained and sad for a second before shaking his head. “But Tsunade-hime isn’t mine to care about.”

“And I am?” Sakura counters and his lips twitch slightly.

“Well, I’m hoping so. Otherwise I’ve been making a fool of myself.” He says with a good natured laugh.

Sakura softens a bit, unable to help herself. He still reminds her of the Jiraiya from her memories, but she can tell the difference between them. This Jiraiya’s lechery isn’t quite so ingrained.

She considers for a long minute.

The Jiraiya she knows would never settle for anyone but Tsunade, but this isn’t the same Jiraiya - and he might be willing to calm down to married life. She doesn’t necessarily *believe* so, but… perhaps.

And there’s nothing to lose in this…

Sakura leans up and presses her lips to his.

His arms are around her in a second, pulling her closer and kissing her fiercely.

“You didn’t tell me.” Jiraiya says in the aftermath, frowning at the stains between them.

Sakura shrugs lightly. “It doesn’t matter to me. As far as firsts go, this wasn’t half bad.” It wasn’t wasn’t *really* her first, only in this life. In her past life, she’d been allowed to live much more frivolously, rather than bouncing from warzone to warzone.

“Half-bad?” He demands, offended, and she grins at him.

“Well with how tall and thick you are, I was kind of expecting-”

He cuts her off with an offended gasp, high-pitched enough to send her into a fit of laughter.

After a moment, he gives in to the urge to laugh as well.

Then he gives in to *other* urges and they start all over again.

“So?” Shikaku asks when she returns to Konoha.

“No.” Sakura says simply, flicking a bit of dirt from the shoulder of her sleeveless dress. “Too lecherous. I’d strangle him after the first month.”

“You just spent three months without strangling him.” Shikaku protests and Sakura shrugs.

“We were busy with other things.” She explains. His eyes roll. “He’s good for that, at least. But imagine if I were actually busy doing something? He’d be insufferable.”

“Hiashi?”

“No.” Sakura says instantly. “I disapprove of the Hyūga Clan’s use of seals.” She informs the man and then looks at him incredulously. “Why do you even care? Why are you bothering me with this?”

“You’re an intriguing woman to bother.” Shikaku offers and Sakura sighs.

“Find another experiment to play with, Shikaku-sama. I’m a busy

woman." And at that, they both fall serious again. "I hear Tsuru's been sent to the Kumo border."

"Yes. With Minato." Shikaku confirms. "The Hachibi's been sealed in the Raikage's brother. He seems to be able to control it with great skill. Only Minato and Tsuru have been able to face the pair and come out alive."

"Only them?" She questions, frowning softly. That's a bit alarming… and that also meant that the Raikage she knew in her last life is the current one.

Which means his 'brother' is Killer B.

Which means Sakura's pocket jinchūriki tackler might directly lead to the untimely death of Killer B.

Someone who had been a friend of Naruto's. Who had taught Naruto how to embrace being a jinchūriki and come out on the other side even stronger for it.

"Is something the matter?" Shikaku's question brings her back to reality and she blinks hard, expression blank.

"Not at all." She says mildly. "I only worry about Tsuru's state of mind. She may be more reckless than usual."

"I have an eye on her mental state."

"You mean Inoichi does?" She suggests lightly at the man frowns a bit at her.

"We both do."

"Good." The last thing Sakura wanted was for Tsuru to be another koi in the pond.

"What about Inoichi?" He starts to suggest, but Sakura recoils so hard he pauses with his mouth still open.

"No. No, no, no." Pictures of Ino flash across her mind, and Inoichi acting as a father figure for her when she was young… "No. Just… no."

"…Alright." Shikaku says very slowly.

"I'll pick someone myself, thank you very much. Now excuse me, I

have a Clan to run.” She says, bowing quickly to the man. He bows back and then she flickers away as fast as she can.

That’s one conversation she hopes to never have again.

Chapter End Notes

> I'm going on vacation, guys, so it might be a few days before the next update. Sorry D:

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

> “When the colors fade and it turns to grey,
> We’ll calmly walk away, walk away from the fray,
> When the structure falls and all else fails,
> We will build it once again." - Once Again, Tristam

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura finds herself at a loss.

There are few people she know in this reality that she hadn’t known in her past one - and thinking of them in the same light as when she was *twelve* makes things creepy.

Now, they’re all either her own age (and almost all of them already getting married) or younger than her.

The fact that Kakashi is eleven while she’s *twenty-five* is beyond strange.

I wish things were simpler, Sakura thinks as she sits beside the koi pond, watching the fish swim around.

There are five fish in it now.

She can’t help but wonder how many more there will be by the end of this bloody war.

Sakura runs her hands down her dress. It’s in the same style as the others - sleeveless, with a slight v-neck, and a slit that goes down the front of it from hips to feet. But instead of the blue or the green one, this one is a bloody shade of red. “Perfect for these times, really.” She muses as she fastens a silver Uzushio hitai-ate across her forehead and a black Konoha one around her hips. She’s going to the Suna border for once - so this time, she wears tight shorts under the dress instead

of leggings.

“How do I look?” Sakura asks, flicking her long braid over her shoulder. It reaches nearly to her lower back, and she turns to face Kushina.

“You look good. Ready for war.” Kushina says, sighing longingly. She slumps against her desk, frowning at Sakura. “Why won’t Sarutobi let me go *help?* I hear the Hachibi is giving everyone hell on the Kumo border - I could go there. I could help Minato…” She trails off, sighing glumly.

“I’m sorry, Kushina.” Sakura says sincerely. She knows all too well what it’s like to be put aside, having to watch from afar, helpless to do more. “I really am.”

“I know.” Kushina mutters, folding her arms and resting her chin on them. “You look good, senpai. Very pretty.”

Sakura blinks, surprised, before smiling. “Thank you, Kushina. You look very pretty too, you know.”

To her further surprise, Kushina blushes deeply at that. “Minato always tells me that.”

So does Jiraiya to her, Sakura can’t help but think. She hesitates, mulling that for a moment before speaking. “Kushina, what’s your opinion of Jiraiya-sama?”

“Jiraiya?” She repeats incredulously. “He hits on me! Constantly!” Sakura blinks at the unexpected vehemence. “And then he claims to be a gentleman. And have you *seen* the kind of things he writes? He showed Minato a chapter of something he’s working on - I’ve never seen him go so red in my *life.”* Kushina complains loudly.

“Ah.”

Icha Icha was already being written, then.

“Why do you ask?” Kushina asks, taking a couple deep breaths to calm down.

“Someone wants me to have an arranged marriage with him.”

“Terrible idea, he’ll sleep around.”

“I agree.” Somewhat.

She somewhat agrees.

He hadn't slept around during those last few months when he'd gotten closer and closer to Tsunade. He knew how to treat a woman right, Sakura can be sure of that. But she can't be sure that he'll treat *her* right.

"Why don't you marry Inoichi? He's smart and… senpai?"

"Don't suggest that." Sakura shudders deeply. "Never suggest that."

"Um. Okay." Kushina says uncertainly.

Sakura just nods sharply at her and turns away, adjusting her dress as she does.

Sakura turns twenty-six while having a drinking contest with Jiraiya and Tsunade.

She wins.

She also goes home with Jiraiya that night, becoming the latest dirty rumor in the process.

"I can't believe you, senpai!" Kushina complains vocally over the throbbing pain of her hangover.

She could cure herself if she really wanted to, but she feels she deserves the suffering.

So does Kushina, judging by how loudly she's speaking. "I can't believe you actually *slept* with him." She pauses. "You *did* have sex with him, didn't you?" She asks with a tiny sliver of hope otherwise.

"Yes. And I should've stayed there and had more." Sakura complains, leaning forward to rest her head on her desk. "It'd be better than this yelling in my-"

"YELLING? I'M NOT YELLING!" Kushia yells.

Sakura grimaces and covers her head with her arms.

Sakura's twenty-six when the war starts to wind down.

Kiri slowly retracts its forces, a silent and paperless surrender that they'll never admit to. Kumogakure retreats after Sarutobi finally gives in and sends both Tsuru and Kushina on Killer B while Minato goes for A. Together, the three took down the two of Kumo's strongest with only a little effort.

They limped home after that, but unlike giving in like Kirigakure, Kumo clings to the land that they'd stolen from Shimogakure. Konoha, so long as they don't toe the territory lines, is content to ignore that.

Suna, who they'd barely had any conflict with, focuses entirely on Iwagakure - same as Konoha - and they become almost-allies.

Until Iwagakure offers up a peace treaty.

"We have to concede land." Sarutobi tells the war council grimly, "but it may be our best option. At this point in the war, we'd be foolish to ignore an offer like this."

"That's a decent chunk of land they're asking for, Hokage-sama." Chōza, the new Clan Head of the Akimichi Clan, pipes up.

"We'll negotiate it down. I suggest we let them keep sixty percent of what they're demanding." Shikaku says, pointing to the scroll Sarutobi had laid out between them all. "They want almost a third of the land north-west of us. We can't give them that - the daimyō would never sign off on it."

"No, he would not. Nor will he agree to sixty percent. Forty, and no higher." Sarutobi murmurs, exhaling a lungful of smoke. "If I leave you to be my negotiator, Shikaku-sama, will you be able to get them to agree to that?"

Shikaku hesitates, looking over the treaty for several long minutes before he nods. "Yes, Hokage-sama." He says with confidence. "I can."

The end of the Third Shinobi World War comes suddenly.

So suddenly that Sakura's head spins a little when it's officially announced. Suna and Kiri have backed off, Kumo is pretending to not still be itching for battle, and Iwa's treaty is officially and publicly signed in Konoha.

And just after Sarutobi signs his half of the treaty, he turns and places his hat on Minato's head.

The coronation for the Yondaime Hokage is huge and explosive, the man far too famous and popular for his own good.

"Kushina-chan is going to have her hands full with this one." Jiraiya says from her side, startling her a bit. Tsunade and Dan are just a step behind him, but Orochimaru is nowhere in sight. Caught looking, Jiraiya offers a small, pained smile. "He's off sulking." He explains flippantly, but she can hear the worried undertone. "He wanted that hat more than anything."

"He's going to have to admit defeat here." Tsunade chimes in, folding her arms across her chest before she suddenly glares at Sakura, who blinks in surprise. "Don't you dare think about taking over my hospital, Uzumaki-san. That's *my hospital.*"

"I wasn't thinking about it at all." Sakura admits, and this time Tsunade looks a little taken aback. "I have too much on my shoulders with my Clan as it is. And for some reason, Nara-sama has taken it upon himself to nag me into getting married."

Jiraiya makes a strangled, choked sound at that and Sakura absently reaches out to pat his arm.

"Don't worry, you and I are going to be bachelors forever. I wouldn't dare ask you to give up other women for me." She teases.

Jiraiya blinks rapidly, and then glances down at her with a teasing expression. "What if I offered?"

This time she freezes.

Absently, she notes that Tsunade does the same, her brown eyes widening like saucers.

"I was kidding." Jiraiya clarifies, but there a hint of nervousness that makes her wonder.

“Would you offer?” Sakura asks incredulously and gets a faint shrug for that.

“We *do* work well together. And the sex is fantastic.”

Dan makes a choked sound, uncomfortably clearing his throat. Tsunade blindly reaches back to swat at him, her intense stare locked on the two of them.

“It is,” Sakura admits. “But I don’t think I can make an honest man out of you.”

“Ah, you’re right.” Jiraiya sighs heavily, like a great weight is on him. “I could never settle for just one delightful rear end, no matter how-” He’s cut off by Tsunade punching him in the face at the same time Sakura elbows him in the ribs. *“-beautiful,”* he finishes in pained squeak.

“You’re coming with me, you little asshole.” Tsunade growls, dragging Jiraiya by his ear while Dan watches helplessly. “It’s time you learn how to properly treat a woman.”

“Are you going to teach me the ways of love-” Another punch. Dan winces and bows politely to Sakura before following them. She watches them go, Jiraiya staggering alongside Tsunade and Dan a few feet behind.

When they’re gone, a strange weight settles over her.

The war is over and she should be happy - but something is missing. Something big.

Her hand rises up to cover the seal tattooed on her left bicep.

Where are you, Black Zetsu?

What are you up to now?

Chapter End Notes

I'm back! And my vacation was great, even if I went seven straight days without internet. *Shudder*

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

> "I am the killer of the sun,
> Just a glimpse of what I have become,
> You can't tell shelter from the shade,
> Shadows move and leave you wide awake." - Pressure,
> Youngblood Hawke

In one life, the Third Shinobi World War had started a year earlier.

In one life, the war didn't *officially* end until Kumogakure signed the treaty four years after Iwagakure had.

In one life.

But in this one, after a subtle suggestion from Sakura, Minato and his wife both go to meet A and Killer B in person.

In this life, the war ends cleanly and all at once.

It doesn't put her at ease.

"I need you to save them all," the Sage's voice echoes in her mind. Sakura sits up, giving up any attempts at sleeping anymore. It's not that she can't sleep, but she doesn't want to.

Not when all she dreams about is the destruction and death of the Fourth Shinobi World War.

Sakura pulls one knee up, resting her chin on it, and exhales slow, steady breaths.

Save them all, his voice echoes.

Save them all.

But how? Sakura closes her eyes. *How do I save them all? How do I save anyone?*

Had she done enough already just by slaying Madara?

No.

No, it wouldn't be that simple.

Black Zetsu was the focal point of it all, and she hasn't seen him *once.*

Where are you, Black Zetsu? She wonders, looking at the shadows in her room.

What hole are you lurking in now?

"She's going to be a kunoichi." Tsuru tells Sakura, watching soon-to-be five year old Saka play in the sand.

"Is she?" Sakura asks, a little bit startled.

Tsuru's face turns dark for a moment before she clears her throat. "This life might have taken Kahan from me, but it won't take her. She's like me." Tsuru lifts her hand, a small chain coming out of her palm. "She can do it, too. She'll be hard to kill with something like this." Tsuru says confidently, her voice barely wavering on the k-word.

"Another shinobi, then." Sakura muses. "It'll be nice. Our clan needs more."

"I hate that word." Tsuru says suddenly, looking down at the sand under their feet. "Clan. We aren't a clan, Sakura. We aren't *meant to be a clan."* She says fiercely, grimacing. "I don't like the idea of my daughter kowtowing as part of the same village that led to ours' destruction."

"Things have changed since then, Tsuru." Sakura reminds the woman quietly. "We aren't at war anymore. Sarutobi is no longer the Hokage. What would you have us do?"

"Go *home."* Tsuru says bitterly, looking up at Sakura. "Is that too much to ask? To go *home?* You said it yourself, we aren't at war now."

"It's not that simple," Sakura protests. "You know it isn't. Konoha

might not be at war, but the second Uzushio starts to rebuild… Between the Sanbi and the Mizukage's insanity, Kirigakure's losing its foothold in the world. They're becoming unpredictable."

In her timeline, Obito had controlled the Mizukage - but even before that, the Mizukage had been bloodthirsty. The Mizukage had put in place the system of passing academy students by having them fight to the death *years* ago. Long enough ago that Zabuza had 'graduated' the same year that Obito had been caught in the rockslide.

Without Obito's control, the man was still insane - but not as… focused. His bloodthirst was widespread and not targeted, and already there were rumors of an uprising - mere *months* after the end of the war.

Tsuru looks away from her, jaw tight. "I don't want her to be one of them."

Sakura watches the woman for a long moment, then takes a deep breath. "Then take her away." Sakura says, her voice going hard. Tsuru's head snaps back around, eyes widening with anger. "Take her away and go if you hate it so much, Tsuru. But our *people* will still be here." She says coldly, standing up and walking away.

Tsuru doesn't say anything, though Sakura's sure if she turns around, the woman will be flipping her the bird.

She feels for the woman, she truly does - sometimes, Sakura entertains the same idea.

But they must be united, not apart. And Tsuru wouldn't leave the Clan, no matter how angry she was.

Sakura's confident in that.

She isn't confident in much else.

Sakura's twenty-seven and the Third War is over.

But the Fourth War looms on the horizon, and no one else even knows.

Sakura watches Minato and Kushina marry, smiling in spite of the anxiety that claws at her throat.

She has a year left.

One year left.

And she *doesn't know what to do.*

She stopped Obito. She stopped Tobi from ever coming to be. But that doesn't mean all is well and good in the world.

On the contrary, she's finding herself more stressed than ever - because now she doesn't know what's going to happen, when it'll happen, or how to stop it.

Sometimes, when she's at her lowest, she looks at Obito and wonders if it wouldn't have been safer to leave him in that cave.

But then he looks at her, all calm confidence and warmth, and she feels like the lowest of the low for even considering that.

"You're a good kid, Obito." Sakura tells him one day, when he sits beside her to watch the koi fish. He's been doing that more and more as of late - probably noticing her grim mood. Obito would do what he could to alleviate that from a stranger - much more so for a friend.

"I heard Kushina-chan talking to sensei about you." Obito tells her in return, a small frown on his face. He's not so much a kid anymore. He's seventeen now, only ten years younger than her, and he looks more like the Obito she knew before. Except this one isn't hiding his scars - and they aren't quite so bad, either, since she healed him. "She said she can barely get you away from here. I thought you only came here to think."

"I do. I just have quite a lot to think about." Sakura explains, frowning at the water.

Rin comes to the forefront of her mind. Someone had put that curse seal on the girl, leading her to her imminent death, just as they had in her past life. But Obito hadn't been in Madara and Black Zetsu's possession, so why had Kiri tried to use Rin still?

Why had Black Zetsu still nudged them in her direction? To try and get Obito to turn still? To what purpose? Madara was dead - Obito wouldn't…

...Wouldn't know who to go to, if he *did* turn sides in this life.

Which meant he'd be a grieving, desperate, aimless teenager.

Easy work for Black Zetsu to manipulate, just as he had before.

Which means Black Zetsu was certainly still working from the shadows.

Which means they aren't safe.

"Obito?"

"Yes, Sakura-senpai?" Obito asks with just a bit of cheek and were she feeling less worn down, she'd smile a bit.

"I hear Kakashi's joining ANBU."

"Yeah." Obito grimaces deeply, face losing all amusement now. "Yeah, he is. Seems set on becoming sensei's personal guard."

"And you?"

"What about me?" Obito blinks at her, frowning.

"You aren't considering following him?"

Obito blinks once, twice, and then rolls his eye. "Don't be ridiculous, Sakura-senpai." He says in a huffing tone of voice that reminds her eerily of Naruto. "Of course I'm going with him." Obito says with flippant confidence, extending his arms to stretch them. "He'd be lost without me. Besides, Sharingan are twice as powerful when together than apart." Obito flashes her a grin so bright she can't help but smile back at him.

"Besides, I have a few tricks up my sleeve that the ANBU need." Obito adds, extending his false hand and turning the palm up at her. A small flower grows from his palm, blossoming right before her eyes, and with the flick of his hand, the flower snaps off and he presents it to her. Sakura stares at it, reaching up with numb fingers to take it.

The same jutsu that had impaled Neji, leaving him to die an agonizing death, and this Obito had just used it to make a flower to cheer up a troubled woman.

For some reason, it brings tears to her eyes.

“Thank you, Obito.” She murmurs genuinely and he smiles warmly at her. She smiles softly back.

But when he turns to leave, her smile fades and a frown replaces it. She studies the flower, innocent and pink like her hair once was. Innocent, but she can’t help but be worried.

Tobi might never happen, but that doesn’t mean Madara won’t.

Or Pain, for that matter.

She knows she can’t save the world from everything.

But she’s still going to do her best.

Sakura spends a straight month trying to get a single hint on Black Zetsu’s movements - but there’s none to be had. The Zetsus are gone, only one ever being discovered by Kushina years ago. Sakura’s sorely tempted to take the fight to them, to go back and raid Madara’s cave, but there’s an army of Zetsu forming under the cavern and she’s not interested in discovering how many are already formed enough.

Naruto’s birth is her deadline, and it’s a year and a half away.

She *needs* to know what Black Zetsu is up to.

“You’ve been secretive lately.”

“It’s none of your business.” Sakura corrects Kushina, who harrumphs at that.

“Your business is my business, Sakura. You’ve been flagging, as well.”

Sakura can’t deny that. She’s tired now, almost constantly. She sleeps, but not well - and for longer than she should.

“I’m getting worried.” Kushina tells her quietly. “Please see a medic-nin?”

“Kushina,” Sakura sighs heavily. “I’m fine, I’m just stressed is all.”

“Then see someone.”

“Fine.”

“It’s just stress. Stop clogging up my hospital.” Tsunade barks at them.

“ *See?”* Sakura demands.

Kushina sighs.

She feels bogged down, but time seems unaffected, moving quickly around her while she struggles to keep up.

Minato and Kushina move out of their home in the Compound, taking up the Hokage’s residence. “It’s a beautiful place,” Sakura acknowledges when Kushina comes to say goodbye.

“I don’t want to leave, but you don’t really have that much work to do now that the war’s over.” Kushina worries her hands, grimacing. “I’m not abandoning you, am I?”

“Kushina.” Sakura huffs, rolling her eyes. “I’m a grown woman,” of almost thirty, and that thought sends a chill down her spine for some reason, “I think I can take care of myself.”

“You *think* you can, but you don’t know it.” Kushina argues.

It’s not exactly a bad argument. Sakura’s never had to fend for herself, but on the other hand, “I have the Clan to help me, Kushina. Don’t worry about me for a second.”

“I can’t help but worry.” Kushina complains.

“Worry about your own problems, not mine.”

“I worry about *both.”* Kushina whines, reaching up to anxiously tug on a lock of her hair. “You forget to eat when I’m not around.”

“Kushina,” Sakura huffs and the young woman winces.

“Alright, alright. I’ll stop panicking. There’s nothing to worry about, right?”

“Nothing at all. Except how you intend on getting all your furniture moved.” Sakura points out and the woman brightens at that.

“Actually, Minato’s abusing his powers to do that. He just touches everything and *hiraishin’s* it across Konoha.” Kushina says with a hint of laughter now.

“You should really at least pretend to help.” Sakura says, amused in spite of herself.

“Oh, no. I’m sitting this one out. Minato can handle it.” Kushina pauses for a moment, frowning. “It’s a shame Obito never seemed too interested in seals. He’d probably be able to use *hiraishin* with his new chakra pools.” She frowns a little deeper, and so does Sakura. “On the other hand,”

“His chakra control.” Sakura finishes for her and they send each other commiserating looks.

“At least he’s got a good personality.”

Sakura grins a little, her tiredness momentarily forgotten. “You *would* think loud and boisterous is a good personality.”

She has to dodge Kushina’s flying elbow, laughing a little.

It’s the first time she can remember laughing in a long time.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

> “So don’t let them steal your light,
> Don’t let them break your stride,
> There is light on the other side,
> And you’ll see all the raindrops falling behind.
> It’s a revolution, and we’ll make it out tonight.” - Revolution, Diplo

“I’m pregnant,” Kushina tells her, smiling brilliantly down at her. Sakura looks up from her desk, staring at Kushina in shock. “I’m pregnant. Aren’t you happy for me?” Kushina demands, her smile vanishing. A frown takes it’s place - but not a worried one at Sakura’s stunned silence. Instead, it looks angry. Black forms around Kushina’s left eye, washing across the left half of her face, and her frown becomes furious. Her eye glows yellow. “Aren’t you happy?” Kushina spits out demandingly, her left hand shooting out.

It’s covered in black and she seizes Sakura by the throat-

Sakura wakes up with an inhale so sharp she chokes on it. She coughs and sputters, sitting up for a moment - but dizziness has her laying back down. *My head,* Sakura thinks, hand rising. She touches her throat briefly, just to double check, then rubs at her eyes.

Her vision is greyed but clearing now that she’s prone again.

She pulls her hand back, holding it over her face.

Her fingertips tremble and so does her next breath.

What’s wrong with me?

She’d done an examination when she first started to feel ill and found nothing wrong. Tsunade herself had examined her and came to the same conclusion.

But the evidence is right in front of her, shakily hovering above her face.

A small chill goes down her spine.

What's going on?

It's not until a month later that Sakura realizes.

Understanding hits her like a brick to the face, and for a moment, all she can do is stare blankly out the window behind her desk.

It's July, she realizes.

Sakura Haruno is going to be born in eight months.

She's been feeling *off* for a month and a half.

No, Sakura thinks, heart rate picking up. *There's no way that's a coincidence, but what does that mean?* She wonders, absently watching the breeze rustle the trees in her backyard.

"There can't be two of the same people." She murmurs, mind spinning.

But no, that isn't quite right either. Technically speaking, there already *are* two of her - one hasn't been born, but she's still alive. But it's also not a coincidence, which means she's missing something.

But what, then? Can there be two, but only if they're split in half?

One Sakura weakening while another Sakura grows stronger every day.

She's not sure, but one thing is clear.

She's running out of time.

Her hand rises to grip her tattooed bicep so hard her knuckles turn white.

Black Zetsu, where the hell are you?

She feels weaker with each day. It's not much of a difference, but it piles on, growing worse and worse. She gets dizzy every time she stands, and if she's on her feet for too long, she starts to pass out. Kushina, pregnant and settled into her new home, isn't around enough to harass her about it much - but it's clear she still worries.

It's fair enough.

Sakura herself is worrying quite a bit.

I'm running out of time, Sakura reflects, standing out back and looking at the koi. *Akihito,* she thinks, gaze following one fish in particular. *What do I do?*

She doesn't get a response.

"I feel huge." Kushina whines, rubbing at her belly.

"You don't look it." Sakura reassures her.

Minato's gone off on some diplomatic mission (to Kumo, which she isn't supposed to know, but Tsuru went with him and she always blabs to Sakura) and Kushina stays with Sakura in the meantime.

"I feel it." Kushina repeats plaintively.

Sakura gently pats her shoulder and passes the woman a stick of dango. They're out and about for the moment, mingling with the general populace. So long as she eats (and steathily munches a chakra pill here and there), Sakura feels more or less alright.

More or less.

Kushina chews down the dango, then eyes her contemplatively. "You don't look any better than when I left."

"Which is incredible, because I thought for sure it was you making me ill." Sakura says blandly. Kushina kicks her under the table and Sakura hisses softly, wincing at the pain. "Kami, you're rude."

"I'm impatient and you're stalling. What's wrong with you? Are you still sick?"

“Still not sick, still just stressed.” Sakura lies confidently. Kushina huffs loudly, not convinced but not informed enough to argue. “How about you? Is pregnancy treating you well?”

“I’m miserable.” Kushina proclaims, waving her empty dango stick for emphasis. “Miserable! Minato’s gone and this little brat keeps trying to play kickball with my insides.” She bitches, scowling at the stick. “If I didn’t love it so much, I’d punch my own stomach.”

“You’re far too violent for your own good.”

“Considering I’m still alive, I’d say my violence has done me just fine.” Kushina sniffs, silently snatching another dango stick. “Besides, someone needs to keep Minato in line. The poor guy still gets nervous when he’s standing up to people.”

“I somehow doubt that.” Sakura says blandly.

“Well he doesn’t stand up to them like I do.”

“Few people do, Kushina.” Sakura points out and the woman huffs again.

“You’re my best friend. You should be supporting me without question.”

Sakura pauses at that, blinking.

Best friend? She wonders, startled. But maybe she shouldn’t be. Without Akihito, Kushina was probably her closest friend as well, though Tsuru was her closest advisor.

“Sorry.” Sakura says belatedly. “Everything’s awful for you, Kushina. I’m sorry.” Sakura commiserated and Kushina shoots her an approving look.

Then she goes back to complaining, and Sakura pretends to listen and nods sympathetically at all the right places.

It’s bizarre to think that she’s listening to the woman speak about an unborn Naruto.

It’s even more bizarre to think that none of her friends have been born yet, either, but are all either on the way or soon will be.

This life is getting more and more complicated.

Naruto hadn't had much time to tell her about his mother. They'd been in the middle of a war when his clone had spoken to her, and she only knew the bare minimum. Tobi used Kushina's weakening seal to unleash the Kyūbi on Konoha, and Kushina and Minato had died sealing the beast.

Memories of Gaara in the aftermath of his bijū removal flicker through her mind and Sakura grimaces.

Kushina had had the Kyūbi torn from her. But that wouldn't happen this time.

She, Tsuru, Tsunade, Sarutobi and his wife Biwako, all stand in Minato's office, listening to the former Hokage's plan. "We'll have to ward off an area outside of Konoha to do this. I'm relying on you two, Tsunade-hime and Sakura-hime, to treat Kushina while Biwako is acting as her midwife. Tsuru, you and Minato-sama will be focusing on keeping the Kyūbi in his place."

"We can do that." Sakura glances at Tsunade and Tsuru, getting nods from both.

"Of course we can. It's overkill to have us both on duty." Tsunade says with an imperious sniff that has Minato sighing softly.

"I know. But it's my wife." Minato reminds them, sobering Tsunade.

"Right, of course." Tsunade nods.

"I'll be able to hold in the Kyūbi for a little while, at least, but my chains are intrusive." Tsuru warns. "Bulky and such."

"That's fine. Your chains are a last resort for us." Minato says tiredly, reaching up to rub at his eyes. "I'd have Rin with us, too, but two jinchūriki's in one spot sounds like a bad idea."

"You don't need three medic-nins of our calibre anyways, Hokage-sama." Sakura chimes in, exchanging a glance with Tsunade. Rin and Shizune were both progressing rapidly under their respective teachings, and it would only take time before they caught up. Shizune, with her limited chakra, would never be able to learn to use the Yin

Seal like Tsunade - but Rin was a jinchūriki now, and she had the potential.

She might even be able to use it like Sakura does, if she can control the Sanbi to use that much of it's chakra.

"True." Minato admits reluctantly. "It'd make me feel better, though."

"You're already going overboard. In fact, I'd like to make a suggestion." Biwako cuts in, frowning at Sakura. "I'd rather we station Uzumaki-sama within Konoha in case things go poorly and we need a medic of her calibre, as you say, in the village."

Sakura blinks at them, glancing at Tsunade again - and ignoring the shiver of *wrongness* that always goes through her when she looks at the woman. The woman offers a faint shrug. Sakura looks back at Biwako and the past and present Hokages. "That sounds fine to me. It'd be smarter to cover all our bases." In case Black Zetsu somehow pulls off the attack like he did in her first life.

"I suppose." Minato says uneasily. "That would be smarter."

"Stop worrying so much!" Biwako suddenly barks, sharply enough that Sakura twitches a bit. "This is why women are the ones who give birth! All you men do is stand around and act like you're the one suffering!"

"I'm not- I didn't mean-"

"Oh, stop it!" Biwako huffs, cutting of Minato, who looks far too much like a boy getting scolded by his mother. It'd be adorable, if it weren't for that fact that he's the one running a nation. "Tsunade-hime will assist me. If you're so worried, her apprentice can come too, so long as she knows to stay out of our way."

"Shizune's an excellent medic. She'll do fine." Tsunade says, shooting Biwako a slightly annoyed look.

"Then that's settled. Tsunade-hime and her apprentice will join us, while Sakura-hime and her apprentice remain here to be on the safe side." Biwako says firmly, leaving no room for argument.

Not that Minato even tries to argue. He just nods and sighs again.

Poor guy.

“We’re assigned to Kushina’s protection duty.” Obito tells her, kneeling in front of the koi pond and making faces down at the fish. He’s eighteen now, and sometimes when she sees him from the corner of her eyes her heart leaps. He looks so much like Tobi that it startles her - but when she really looks at him, the differences are enormous.

He’s carefree and young, not bitter and angry. His scars aren’t as severe, especially when he smiles.

“You’re in the same team?” Sakura asks, watching the fish swirl in front of Obito. They’re clearly eager for food, but Obito’s holding out on them, too busy playing.

“Of course.” He says absently, gaping his mouth to mock the fish. “I told you, Kakashi’d be lost without me.” He glances at her, flashing her a grin. “Besides, we work too well together now for them to separate us.”

“Good.” Sakura acknowledges, frowning softly. “Good.”

Obito’s Mokuton - which Sakura officially speaking has no knowledge of - would be invaluable, alongside Tsuru’s chains, at keeping the Kyūbi at bay.

“You alright, Sakura-senpai?” Obito asks, looking over at her with genuine worry. “Rin thinks you’re sick, and you’re not doing much to prove her wrong.”

“I’m fine.” Sakura lies. She’s not fine. She feels weaker every passing day, and she has no idea what’ll happen when the other Sakura is actually born, but for now…

For now, there was one too many Sakuras in the world, and she was tasting the backlash of it.

“I’ve been having trouble sleeping is all.” She half-lies, because she’s definitely having sleeping trouble but that’s not *all* of it.

She’s also constantly dizzy and uneasy. Her vision goes dark anytime she moves too quickly, like there’s not enough blood in her body, and she’s tired *all the time.*

Sakura exhales slowly, ignoring the concerned look Obito shoots her. “Tell Rin to come by first thing in the morning, will you?” She asks and Obito arches a brow before nodding.

“Sure thing.”

“Stop tormenting the fish.”

“Sorry.”

Rin shows up first thing, as promised, and Sakura looks at the girl intensely. “I think it’s time I teach you what made me so famous, Rin.” Sakura says, gesturing for her to follow. She leads Rin to her office, seals scattered across her desk.

“It’s time you learned my fūinjutsu.”

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

> “I’m gonna be released from behind these lines
> And I don’t care whether I live or die
> And I’m losing blood, I’m gonna leave my bones
> And I don’t want your heart, it leaves me cold.” - Leave My Body, Florence + The Machine

Chapter Notes

> Watch out for cliffs on your way down.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time passes quickly and all Sakura can do is be dragged along with it.

October comes in the blink of an eye, and Sakura watches Kushina leave Konoha with a heavily worried mind. Tsunade, Biwako, Minato, Shizune, and a host of ANBU escort her, but it doesn’t feel like enough.

It doesn’t feel like anything can be enough.

Not when it comes to this.

Black Zetsu, Sakura thinks, reaching up to cover the seal on her bicep.

Where are you? What are you plotting?

Sakura stays at the wall around Konoha, waiting - just in case. She stands there and she waits, ignoring the curious looks she gets.

It pays to be cautious.

There’s a faint tickle of *wrongness* in the air, hours after Kushina’s gone.

And then suddenly, the Kyūbi appears in front of the gates, massive and tails furiously stirring the wind.

No, Sakura thinks numbly, watching the creature throw it’s head back and roar. *How did it get through them all? Through Tsuru, Obito, and the*

rest?

The chakra rushes over her in a burning fury and Sakura quickly flickers to the top of the wall, nearly swallowing her tongue. The chakra is insanely strong, pressing down on her like a physical weight, and the beast is insanely huge. Even from the top of Konoha's walls, she's barely past the monster's elbows.

The Kyūbi lunges, paws obliterating the wall on either side of Sakura. For a moment, all she can see is the Kyūbi's furry, chakra-fiery chest, and then it throws its head back. A black bijū ball begins to form in its mouth, chakra becoming somehow more dense. Sakura wavers under the force of it, nearly falling to a crouch, before the ball is shot at Konoha.

Sakura watches it go, sailing over her head and going right for the Hokage monument - before being abruptly sucked up and vanishing. White chains shoot out from the ground, wrapping around the Kyūbi's neck and legs, wrenching the beast down. Sakura finds herself at eye level with it for a moment, and surprise jolts through her.

The bijū has Sharingan eyes.

Sharingan- of course.

Sakura turns and flickers away, moving as fast as she can. She tags everyone she passes, funneling her chakra into keeping them alive, until she reaches her destination. She arrives in the Uchiha's compound in a mere minute, immediately heading for Fugaku's home - but she finds it almost empty. "Itachi," She greets the young boy, cradling a baby Sasuke, and the boy looks up at her.

"Uzumaki-hime? My parents are out." He says and Sakura curses softly. Itachi frowns at that.

"Your elders. Where are they?" Sakura asks urgently and Itachi points to a few houses down.

Sakura moves as fast as she can.

The Kyūbi's chakra has moved past the outskirts of Konoha by the

time Sakura finds what she needs.

It's an elder named Heizo who has it and she carries the elderly man on her back, pushing all the chakra she can spare into her legs. She flickers rapidly, not pausing to do anything more than to take a breath.

It takes them nearly five minutes to reach the Kyūbi.

By the time she does, Tsuru's kneeling on the ground, a pool of blood twice her size under her, and Kushina's on the other end of the Kyūbi. Both of them have chains out, wrapping around the beast to hold it down.

"Now, Heizo-dono!" Sakura pleads urgently, and the man's eyes flicker. The Sharingan twists, becoming something else entirely, and the Sharingan vanishes from the Kyūbi's eyes.

For a moment, the beast goes still.

And then it fights almost harder than before. Tsuru grunts and Sakura goes to her side, pressing her hands to the woman's back. "Stop," Tsuru snaps. "Don't waste it on me, save your chakra for this thing." She snarls.

Sakura ignores her, healing the woman enough that she stops bleeding quite so much, and then looks at the Kyūbi. "What happened?"

"It was Fugaku." Tsuru says darkly. "But it wasn't him. Something's wrong with him - half his body was solid black, and the he was barely conscious. His eyes- something's controlling him." Tsuru pants out, reaching up to clutch her wounded chest.

One of the Kyūbi's claws had gotten her, nearly cleaving her in two.

The words send ice running down Sakura's spine and she looks up at the Kyūbi with new, horrified eyes.

Shit. Black Zetsu… but why…?

"Tsuru. I need you to do something for me."

"I can't do much right now, Sakura-sama." Tsuru hisses out, sweat and blood running down her temple.

"I need you to isolate what half of the Kyūbi you're holding onto. Seize only its Yin chakra. Can you do that, Tsuru?"

For a moment the woman just kneels there, panting heavily, before she gives a jerky nod. “Yes. I can. But why?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just hold on.” Sakura instructs, and then flickers past the Kyūbi as quickly as she can. She kneels beside Kushina, setting a hand on the woman’s back - and recoils the second she does.

The woman’s chakra coils have been *fried* by the removal of the Kyūbi. “Kushina, I need you to do something. Move your chains so you’re only holding onto the Yang half of its chakra.”

“What?” Kushina asks breathlessly and Sakura shakes her head.

“I can’t seal something this big. We need to split it in two, and then I can seal it away.”

“Split it?” Kushina repeats, panting heavily, but after a moment, she gives a shaky nod. “Right. Let me just-”

The air moves behind them and Sakura has just enough time to turn, and then she scrambles sideways. She covers Kushina and Fugkau’s jutsu hits her back, searing at the skin. Sakura cries out briefly, the pain taking her breath away, and then she releases her Yin seal.

Strength of a Hundred, she draws out immediately, not hesitating to use the trump card. She turns, ready to punch a hole through Fugaku’s chest - and then hopefully heal him afterwards - but Black Zetsu moves.

Not Fugaku.

Just Black Zetsu.

The black half of him springs away and Sakura finds herself freezing mid-punch, the inky blackness swallowing her extended arm - and then her entire left side.

No, Sakura thinks, but it’s too late.

She straightens up, Fugaku collapsing to the ground like a puppet with it’s strings cut, his eye sockets bleeding, and Sakura turns against her will. **“You’re still alive? Stubborn.”** Zetsu says to Kushina, who watches her with horrified eyes. Sakura’s left hand reaches down, wrapping around the hilt of her sword, and she draws the katana in one smooth motion. **“We’ll remedy that.”**

No, Sakura urges, struggling against it, but it's like trying to knock down a brick wall. Zetsu barely seems to notice her struggle, and that makes her fight even harder. Her right hand curls around something hot and wet. She can't move her neck to see what it is.

"No." Kushina murmurs, her expression pained.

A chakra chain flies out and strikes Sakura, whipping her in the left side. She soars through the air, Zetsu wavering for a split second. Sakura reacts too late, and the second they hit the ground, Zetsu has regained full control. *Damn it.* Her sword arm rises, Kushina watching warily from a few feet away.

"Sakura, don't do this. You can overpower him." Kushina urges.

Sakura had thought she'd been able to. Obito had made it look so easy.

She'd *severely* underestimated Obito's willpower.

"Don't bother with that." Black Zetsu scoffs, and for a moment, Sakura's head turns to watch the Kyūbi. **"Ah. I see now."** He muses, and then moves.

Sakura can do nothing but fight helplessly as Zetsu flickers them to Tsuru's side and buries Sakura's sword in the woman's spine.

No! Sakura screams in her mind, but her lips don't even move as the woman falls in a spray of blood. Tsuru looks up at her, blue eyes blown wide, and her mouth moves soundlessly before she coughs up blood. It gushes from her lips, so fast that Sakura knows only the *Strength of a Hundred* could save her now, but Zetsu won't let her move.

"Saka," Tsuru coughs before she begins to choke.

Zetsu finally moves, pulling her sword from the woman's back, and Sakura's forced to turn away from the woman drowning in her own blood.

Tsuru, she thinks desperately, tears burning at her eyes - but she can barely even blink the tears free.

They roll down her cheeks and she turns to the Uchiha elder, whose eyes flicker. Black Zetsu immediately flickers them away, reappearing beside Kushina, and Sakura braces herself. Her sword comes down,

almost hitting Kushina before the woman's chains lash out again. She's struggling, panting for every breath and barely holding the Kyūbi down on her own now. Zetsu jumps nimbly over the chains, drawing on Sakura's chakra.

She spits out a bullet of water, piercing straight through Kushina's shoulder, and the woman wavers. The chains go slack for a split second, the Kyūbi moving to strike, but Kushina tightens the chains just in time. The Kyūbi's paw slams down so hard that the earth shakes with it.

She stumbles, Zetsu catching their balance.

A whoosh of air and suddenly a kunai is thrown straight at the back of her head. Sakura sways around it, turning to see Obito and Minato standing there - Obito bloodied and battered but intact.

And watching her with horrified eyes. "Senpai?" He breathes out, a pained expression flickering across Minato's face at his voice. *Obito,* Sakura thinks achingly.

"You're complicating things." Black Zetsu murmurs through her lips.

"Obito, help Kushina!" Sakura manages to blurt out, and the next thing to escape her is a cry. Black Zetsu battens down, suddenly feeling more like he's strangling her than stifling her.

It hurts.

She feels like she could choke on her grief as she looks at them, doubled over slightly at the pain before Zetsu straightens them up.

"Let's take this somewhere else." Minato says grimly, making a quick hand sign before holding one of his kunai out.

There's a faint sensation of being dragged, and then she finds herself standing somewhere new. It's still the Land of Fire - the forests are the same - but Minato appears before she can figure out where. He doesn't hesitate to do his duty as Hokage.

He appears behind her and lashes out, kunai stabbing through her shoulder. But the *Strength of a Hundred* is still flowing through her, easily sealing up the hole he leaves.

He doesn't make the same mistake twice.

He leaves every kunai still buried inside her, and Zetsu has to keep pulling them out before attacking - and then getting stabbed more times. **"Damn you,"** Zetsu hisses, **"Stop getting in my way."**

"What do you want?" Minato demands, nearly impaling her throat, but Zetsu ducks in time.

"The Kyūbi. Oh, and world peace," Zetsu chuckles at that, like it's some big joke.

There are still tears running down her face.

"At least, that's what I told the man who gave me this." Zetsu murmurs before he reaches up.

There's nothing in the world that can stop Sakura from screaming as he pulls her right eyeball out. He throws it carelessly to the side, replacing it with a new eyeball, and Sakura's stomach churns viciously. "Minato," She half-sobs out through the pain and grief, the *Strength of a Hundred* healing the eyeball into place. "Stop me, please." She pleads.

The eye settles in.

Her bloody hand rises up to go for the other one, Minato watching with wide eyes.

"Please!" Sakura screams.

The fingers start to sink it.

At the last second, the hand wrenches away, Zetsu throwing himself to the side to avoid Minato's attack. The man flies at them with blinding fervor, every strike aimed to kill, but the *Strength of a Hundred* keeps her alive and intact.

Minato goes for the head, kunai grazing the side of her skull, and Zetsu wavers.

For just a split second, he wavers.

This time, Sakura seizes the chance. She manages to raise her hand just a little, curling her smallest and ring fingers, and hisses out, *"KAI!"*

The seal on her bicep burns like it was set on fire.

Chapter End Notes

(I'm sorry)

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

> “Cause she’s a cruel mistress,
> And a bargain must be made.
> But oh, my love, don’t forget me
> When I let the water take me.” - What The Water Gave Me, Florence + The Machine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The seal on her bicep burns like searing fire, spreading outward until it consumes her body - Zetsu and all.

“What is this?!” Zetsu cries out, a crimson barrier forming up around them. It flies up just in time for Minato to hit it, bouncing away with a pained shout, and Sakura almost feels bad for him and the chakra burns she’d just given him.

She’s a bit too preoccupied to care much, though.

“This…” Sakura pants out with enormous effort, “is the work… of Uzushio… seal masters… you *idiot.”* There’s blood in her mouth. It’s on her clothes, oozing from the stab wounds Minato’s attacks had left her worth. The *Strength of a Hundred* trickles into her wounds, but *pours* into the barrier.

“You… you’re draining me! How are you draining me?!” Zetsu cries out, struggling to peel away from her, but Sakura has a foothold now. She seizes him hard, using all her willpower to hold him in place. Black Zetsu pulls against her, but the seal helps to anchor their combined chakra together. He can’t get away.

It drains at them both, chakra funnelling away - and Zetsu, unlike her, is a creature made of pure chakra.

“Tsuru… says fuck you… from the afterlife… you asshole.” Sakura struggles to say, every word coming through clenched teeth. It’s impossibly hard to do anything, but if she puts all her effort into it, she can manage the smallest things. Sakura looks up at Minato through damp lashes, tears drying now, and glares at him. “Go help… Kushina and Obito… He can’t escape… this jutsu.”

“What are you doing?” Minato asks, staring at her with a tense expression.

“Draining him… and myself… away.” Sakura pants heavily, sinking to her knees. Her body trembles. “Our chakra is… fueling the barrier.” She shares, and it truly is a work of art.

Kahan had said so himself.

The seal latches onto the chakra of it’s user and it’s target, siphoning away the chakra to fuel the barrier sealing the victim in. It’s an inescapable prison of slow, carefully measured death.

Minato seems to realize this, his skin paling and his expression becoming pained.

“Go. Help Kushina.” She urges.

“Don’t die.” Minato instructs before, with a pained, grim look, he flickers away at light speed.

Sakura immediately sinks the rest of the way to the ground, laying on her left side. Zetsu struggles against her in vain, her entire attention focused on forcing him to stay attached to her. The seal helps, weakening him and her at the same rate.

“No… this isn’t right. Release me! Let me go!” Zetsu snarls, struggling viciously - but the barrier drains him away bit by bit.

Just as it drains her.

She’s not sure how long she’s lied there, eyes closed and body braced to hold Zetsu in place, when someone interrupts her. “Senpai…” Obito’s voice says in a pained tone. She opens her eyes to see him, Kakashi, and Minato approaching. Obito kneels down at the edge of the barrier, looking through it at her with a tense expression. “Drop the barrier. There must be some other way to destroy it.”

“There’s not.” Sakura murmurs tiredly. “It’s a creature of chakra… so I’m draining it.”

“I won’t let you.” Zetsu hisses, but it’s in vain. It’s all in vain.

Sakura closes her eyes, exhaustion licking at the edges of her.

“It’s draining you, too!” Obito protests and Sakura opens her eyes a slit to look at him. “Cancel it! Find another way!”

“There is no other way, Obito. This is... the only way I could come up with. It’s draining me as well, yes.... but that’s the price of it draining away... this monster.” The seal binds Zetsu to her, holding his chakra to hers, and thus the seal drains them both. It’ll kill them both, soon enough.

But with the *Strength of a Hundred* still flowing through her, there’s a good chance Zetsu will die before she does. And even if he doesn’t, he’ll be severely weakened.

“Let me go!” Zetsu snarls furiously, but she refuses, holding him tight. His struggles get weaker and weaker with each passing second.

“I won’t.” Sakura vows fiercely before looking up at Obito, Minato and Kakashi a step behind him. Obito looks stricken, but the other two watch her grimly. “Hokage-sama. Is Kushina…?”

“We took care of it. Obito and Kushina did as you instructed. The Yin half is back in Kushina, but the Yang half we sealed in our son - Naruto.” Minato explains quietly, kneeling down beside Obito at the edge of the barrier. “That was genius of you. It would have been impossible to re-seal while still whole. Kushina’s too weakened.”

“Good. And… the others?”

“Heizo-dono is safe. Tsuru… was beyond saving.” Minato says softly and Sakura squeezes her eyes shut. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It was my hand.”

“But not you controlling it.”

“It’s still my hand... that her blood is on, Minato.... and my sword.” She exhales a harsh breath, swallowing thickly. Zetsu’s stopping moving all together, turning a faintish grey instead of black, and Sakura blinks back spots from her vision. “Do me a favor, Minato?” She asks, voice wavering.

“Yes?”

“Don’t let Kushina... buy the fish. She doesn’t... deserve that.”

“I’ll do it.” Obito chokes out immediately, tears flowing from his eye. “I’ll take care of it.”

“And someone… take this eye... and burn it. Before someone uses it.”

With shaking fingers, she lifts her hand - now starting to return to flesh-colored as Black Zetsu is slowly siphoned away - and sinks her fingers in. With a small cry and a hard flinch from Obito, she rips the Rinnegan from her eye socket and lets it fall, rolling away with a disgusting squelch.

The pain vanishes almost immediately, the *Strength of a Hundred* still flowing, but even that is slowing down now.

"No…" Black Zetsu whispers weakly. **"Mother…"**

He fades further and further, and eventually, he goes away completely.

Sakura drifts away, too.

"You've done it." The Sage of Six Paths says to her quietly. She's standing in a white abyss, the man/alien floating cross-legged in front of her. "It wasn't quite what I expected, but you stopped him."

"Why did he come after the Kyūbi? It was too early for him to seal it away, wasn't it?"

"No. Zetsu never needed the Akatsuki to seal the bijū - he only needed the statue and the Rinnegan, and he had both. The Akatsuki were only his means of capturing the jinchūriki and using the Rinnegan. The Kyūbi's seal was weak, you know this well. He could very well seal it away into the statue himself. The only difficulty lied in him controlling it and keeping it from resisting - and having a body to use the Rinnegan through."

"Henc e Fugaku." Sakura realizes quietly and the Sage nods.

"Hence Fugaku." He confirms. "I asked you once to save everyone, Sakura Haruno. And as Sakura Uzumaki, you have. But there's work to be done yet."

"Work? Haven't I done enough?" Sakura asks tiredly, rubbing at her eyes.

"Do you forget so easily? Black Zetsu may no longer be here to cause strife, but my sons may yet follow in their past incarnations steps. I need you, Sakura-hime, to serve as a bridge between them. To keep them from killing one another, or causing another apocalyptic event themselves. Help them

become what they were at the end. Brothers, not enemies." The Sage implores.

"How? How can I do that? You made me too old, Sage-sama." Sakura says, lips twitching a tiny bit bitterly. "I'm old enough to be their mothers now."

"Be their mentor. Be their sensei. Teach them, and teach yourself alongside them." He says, a small shiver running through her at that idea. To train herself *to be a kunoichi? "There are wrinkles in time. Things that were not meant to exist. You've felt one yourself - every time you go near your once-mentor and her husband that's meant to be dead." Sakura blinks at that, surprised. "It's wrong. It wasn't meant to be, and you can feel that. But you brought it, Sakura, and that power you have will be needed in the years to come."*

"You changed the world by saving one life. You created something that was never meant to exist. You'll feel that every time you're near your incarnation. Sakura Haruno will be a toxin to you, overwhelmingly wrong to you every time you go near her. But I will help you with that. Her life force calls for yours, trying to pull together two pieces of the same puzzle." The Sage explains and Sakura understands now why she's been so exhausted, *day in and day out. No matter how much she's slept, or how long she's rested.*

"So I will remedy that. Once, I gave your teammates my chakra. Now, I will give you my lifeforce. With it, you will be protected. Your lifeforce will go to her, and mine will go to you."

The Sage pauses for a moment, looking at her intently with his eerie, three eyes.

"You will never hear from me, after this." He warns her.

"I lived an entire life without hearing from you." Sakura points out and he bows his head slightly in acknowledgement. "I can continue that path."

"So you shall. One day, I'll return to give my chakra to my sons. But until that day, farewell, Sakura Uzumaki. May you spend this lifeforce wisely."

There's a faint rushing of air across her skin, roaring in her ears, and the world goes black.

In the shinobi hospital of Konoha, in one of its highest priority room, Sakura Uzumaki opens her eye.

Chapter End Notes

> And so we're coming to a close. Sorry for being a day late! Had to tweak some stuff! Hope you enjoyed!

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

> “Don’t lose your way with each passing day,
> You’ve come so far, don’t throw it away.
> Live believing, dreams are for weaving,
> Wonders are waiting to start.
> Live your story - faith, hope, and glory,
> Hold to the trust in your heart.” - If We Hold On Together, Diana Ross

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura’s hands shake as she lowers a new fish into a pond. It’s white with spots the deepest shade of crimson Sakura could find.

The same color of Tsuru’s hair - and her blood, as well.

Sakura will never forget that.

“I’m sorry, Tsuru.” She whispers to the fish, watching it swim with the pack like it’d been there all along.

She knows the woman wouldn’t blame her for what happens and she tries to keep that in mind when the guilt threatens to consume her.

“I’m sorry.”

Sakura’s twenty-nine and she’s changed the world forever, more than one time now. She saved Uzushio from being forgotten, birthed the Uzu Clan from sheer stubborn determination, saved countless lives in two different wars, and had stopped the Kyūbi attack from ending the lives of Konoha’s two most important people - the Hokage and his wife.

In a time when the Uchiha Clan would have been shunned and blamed for the Kyūbi’s Sharingan control, they’re celebrated instead.

Heizo-dono is awarded for his efforts - for being brave enough to go right up to the Kyūbi's face and stare it down. Fugaku and Sakura spend that time in the Critical Care Unit, under Tsunade's personal attentions.

"It wasn't your fault." Tsunade says firmly as she unwraps the bandages around Sakura's left eye. "We've made sure the world knows that. They're too busy being afraid of a shadow to hate you for what you did."

The words are strangely reassuring. Or maybe it's the steady confidence in her tone that does it.

She peels away the last of the bandage and Sakura winces at the sudden sunlight. "You're lucky we managed to get your eye in time. Your shinobi career would have taken a bad turn without it." Tsunade notes, gently prodding the edges of her eye socket. Chakra eases the discomfort and Tsunade hums to herself. "You're good to go, I'd say. Once you've recovered your chakra, that is. Give it another day or two - you're already recovering it much faster than anticipated."

The Sage of Six Paths, Sakura thinks but doesn't dare say. Her lips twitch downwards a bit.

"You have a visitor. Do I let him in?" Tsunade asks and Sakura hesitates before nodding. "Alright. Excuse me, then, I need to check on Uchiha-sama." Tsunade sighs heavily before leaving. The door reopens not long after, and to her surprise, it's Jiraiya who walks in.

He's grinning a bit sheepishly, holding a small bouquet in his hands. "Here." He offers it to her and she takes it, bringing the flowers closer. Roses. Red and yellow - love and friendship. She smiles softly to herself.

"Thank you, Jiraiya." She says and his smile becomes less sheepish and more pleased.

"You're welcome." He sits down at her bedside, large body looking a silly in such a small chair. "You've been out for a couple days and have missed out on a few things."

"Tell me." Sakura implores softly and he smiles, proud and a little sad.

"Congratulations, Sakura-hime. You're a hero."

She's celebrated for destroying the monster that sicced the Kyūbi on Konoha.

It's much more bitter than it is sweet, in her mind. She buys a fish, releasing it into the pond in Tsuru's honor, and wonders if she even has the right to.

"Tsuru was a vicious woman." Jiraiya muses when they go out to dinner, shortly after her release from the hospital. Sakura gently pokes at her food, contemplating it and Jiraiya's words. "I remember when I first met her. She came out of nowhere. Orochimaru, Tsunade and I had been fighting back the jinchūriki for *hours,* and all of a sudden this woman sweeps in and tackles the thing like it was nothing. Her chains," Jiraiya whistles lowly. "Unlike anything. And she knew how to use them." Jiraiya adds the last part with an eyebrow wiggle.

Sakura kicks him hard under the table, amused but also pained by that. It should be too soon to laugh at the memory of the dead, but it cheers her better than anything else had. "You're awful."

"Only in a rare, few ways. I've been told I'm *extraordinary* in others." He says with a wink.

She can't help but laugh lightly at that.

It's weak and fleeting, but the grin it brings to Jiraiya's face isn't.

They're a strange pair, Sakura acknowledges. She still remembers him as a fifty year old, lecherous goof who never knew when to be serious. But she also remembers him as he is now - from his thirties up until the day he turns forty, a mere two months before she turns thirty.

She remembers him at fifty, and sometimes she feels like *she's* fifty. She's seventeen and thirty, mixed into one body and mind.

But none of that matters when Jiraiya looks at her with the utmost seriousness. "I think we should get married."

Sakura blinks at him, taking in the slight tension in his shoulders and

the utmost genuity in his expression. She thinks, reflecting on the way he's always been gentle with her, and always respected her decisions in their relationship.

"You realize we'll have to be monogamous if we do?" Sakura questions, because that's one thing she hasn't asked of him yet.

"I've been practicing monogamy for the past year. I think I can keep it up for a good enough reason." His grin returns, winking at her, and Sakura rolls her eyes at his expression.

"You're ridiculous." She complains before sobering. She looks at him and he looks back, gaze locked for a long minute. "Alright. But you're taking my name."

"I've always wanted to be Uzumaki." Jiraiya says cheerily - and as casual as he tries to appear, she can easily see an extra bounce in his step.

"Say it's a lie." Kushina demands at dinner and Sakura fights down a grimace. All of them are there, for the first time in a while. Obito and Kakashi aren't on ANBU missions, Rin's free from the hospital, Minato's free from paperwork, and Kushina's off missions as well.

Naruto, all of two years old, watches with silent interest as his mother pleads.

"It's not. He bought me a ring and everything." Sakura points to her own hand.

It's a simple little thing of platinum metal and an adequately sized diamond, with two smaller garnets on either side of it. The deep red is almost the same shade of her hair.

She'd been especially touched by that part when he'd offered it to her.

"I think it's nice." Rin chimes, leaning in to see the ring. Sakura extends her hand and she ooh's softly at it.

Reluctantly, Kushina leans in too, pulling a small face. "Well at least he has good taste." She mutters unforgivingly.

“Frankly, I’m just impressed you managed to rope him into this.” Minato admits, rubbing at his chin. “Sensei isn’t the type to settle down.”

“And he won’t.” He’s far too busy for that, as Konoha’s primary Spymaster. “But he’ll stop sleazing around when it’s not for a good reason.”

“What does he count as a good reason?” Kushina mutters. Sakura ignores her.

“Besides, he’s good to me, and me to him. We’ll do fine.”

And they do.

A year later, a year before it was once supposed to happen, Kumo *finally* writes up an official treaty to bring an end to the ongoing strife between them and Konoha, and the celebration is huge. Tensions had still lingered even after Minato and Kushina met with A and Killer B, in spite of all attempts to make peace.

The Third War had ended, but the rare few skirmishes between the two of them had continued.

That night, Sakura just so happens to find herself near the Hyūga Compound after the celebrations die down, and just so happens to catch the Head Shinobi of Kumo trying to sneak in.

She just so happens to offer him to Hiashi.

The ninja just so happens to quietly go back to Kumo, deeply traumatized and suddenly terrified of the Byakūgan.

She’s sad it still had to happen as it was - that the efforts Minato had put forth hadn’t been quite enough to stop the event.

But she doesn’t regret her part in it.

Nearly a year after that, Orochimaru leaves Konoha in a blaze of murder and betrayal. He leaves behind the bodies of butchered children and one survivor, who Sakura cradles with a strange twisting in her chest. “Yamato,” She mutters under her breath, recognizing the twelve year old’s hair and eyes.

That night, she holds Jiraiya as he cries like she’s never seen him cry before, and wonders if she couldn’t have stopped the man somehow.

Yamato - so named by Sakura - is almost immediately made ANBU, alongside Obito under Kakashi’s command. “He’s a good kid.” Obito tells Sakura, some months later. “He’s learning the Mokuton as fast as I can teach him. He’ll be better at it than me, one day.” Obito says, frowning a little down at his fake arm. After a moment, he looks back up at her, and the smile he gives her transforms his face.

Yet again, with a twist in her gut, Sakura’s reminded of just how different this Obito is to the one that had almost taken everything away from her.

“Don’t tell anyone this, but we’ve already given him a code name. Tenzō.” Obito says quietly, smile soft. “He fits in like family.”

She smiles back.

This time, when he leaves, he leaves her with more than just a flower.

He leaves her with a cherry tree to stand beside her koi pond, some of the branches bending down so that the leaves just barely tickle the surface of the water.

Sakura’s thirty-two, and then she thirty-three, and in the blink of an eye, she’s forty years old and meeting her genin team for the first time.

“Hello everyone.” She greets them, smiling even as her skin feels like it’s trying to crawl off her. “My name is Sakura Uzumaki. You may call me Uzumaki-sensei, for the sake of clarity.” Sakura says, nodding pointedly to the girl causing her discomfort.

Sasuke Uchiha, Naruto Namikaze, and Sakura Haruno all look up at her with attentive eyes.

She looks back at them and vows that this time, things are going to be different.

Even if she regrets taking Kakashi’s place from him, she vows.

This part of history, too, will not repeat itself.

She’ll make sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

> “I was born for this, born for this,
> It’s who I am, how could I forget?
> I made it through the darkest part of the night,
> And now I see the sunrise,
> Now I feel glorious, glorious,
> I feel glorious, glorious.” - Glorious, Macklemore
> (Thank you for the song recommendation! You were right, it definitely fits Sakura’s character!)
>
> And so we reach the end of our journey, and I'm so grateful to you all for joining me on it. I hope you all enjoyed, and wish you all have excellent days ♥

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